

*Like a Dove*

In the Cleft of the Rock



Matthew Manint

*O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,  
in the covert of the cliff,  
let me see your face*

Song of Songs

According to a French tradition, St. Mary Magdalene spent the final decades of her life in reclusion and prayer. Alone in a mountain grotto, she pondered on all that had happened since she first met her Beloved. She knew that Jesus called her to the deepest union with his heart, and she poured all her efforts into seeking this union.

God created every soul for the very same intimacy. In this work, the Song of Songs, the life of Mary Magdalene, and the writings of mystics intertwine to show how seeking, finding, and loving the heart of God brings true joy.

Let us now join St. Mary Magdalene in her search for the Beloved.

*We shall go at once  
To the deep caverns of the rock  
Which are all secret,  
There we shall enter in  
And taste of the new wine*

St. John of the Cross

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Dedicated to Le Apostole della Vita Interiore  
(The Apostles of the Interior Life)

*“Gratis accepistis, gratis date.”*

Gospel of Matthew 10:8

*“That form of active life in which a man, by preaching and teaching, delivers to others the fruits of his contemplation, is more perfect than the life that stops at contemplation, because such a life is built on an abundance of contemplation, and consequently such was the life chosen by Christ.”*

The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas

III, Q. 40, Art. 1, ad. 2.

Many thanks to all who have encouraged me to write, especially my parents Jim and Cathy and my sister Jeannine.

A very special thanks to my friend Kate Essenberg. I sent her a draft and asked for “a bit of feedback,” as she is a very busy wife and mother. She proceeded to go above and beyond by editing the whole thing. She is the Terror of Mismatched Pronouns, the Scourge of Weak Sentences.

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# Preface

**T**HE CORE OF THIS BOOK comes from a retreat that I was asked to preach in May, 2013 to the Apostles of the Interior Life. The Apostles are a religious community (more exactly, a “society of apostolic life”) that was founded in Rome in 1990. The sisters who are based in the United States would be meeting at St. Benedict’s Abbey in Atchison, KS for their annual retreat.

When I had first received the invitation via email in 2012, I was stunned. The Apostles of the Interior Life (hereafter named “AVI” for their initials in Italian – “Apostoli della Vita Interiore”) are the holiest religious sisters that I have ever met. For several years, I was blessed to have one of them, Sr. Raffaella, as my spiritual director. I even had the opportunity to discern my vocation with them in Rome for 5 months. It turned out that God had other plans for me, but I always found it a great blessing to stay in contact with them.

A major element of the apostolate of AVI is the art of spiritual direction—being a guide and mentor to others in climbing the mountain of holiness. The sisters engaged in this work full time. Therefore, I felt like a Little League baseball coach being asked to give a seminar to a professional team. And yet, I had not even finished reading the email when one phrase rose in my thoughts: “Like a dove in the cleft of the rock.” This brief line from the biblical book *The Song of Solomon* (also known as “*The Song of Songs*” or “*The Divine Canticle*”) lodged itself in my mind along with an accompanying theme: “A retreat on the consecrated life viewed through the lens of the *Song of Solomon* and the

life of Mary Magdalene.” It seemed to me that the theme from the retreat was given as a grace, but was it legitimate?

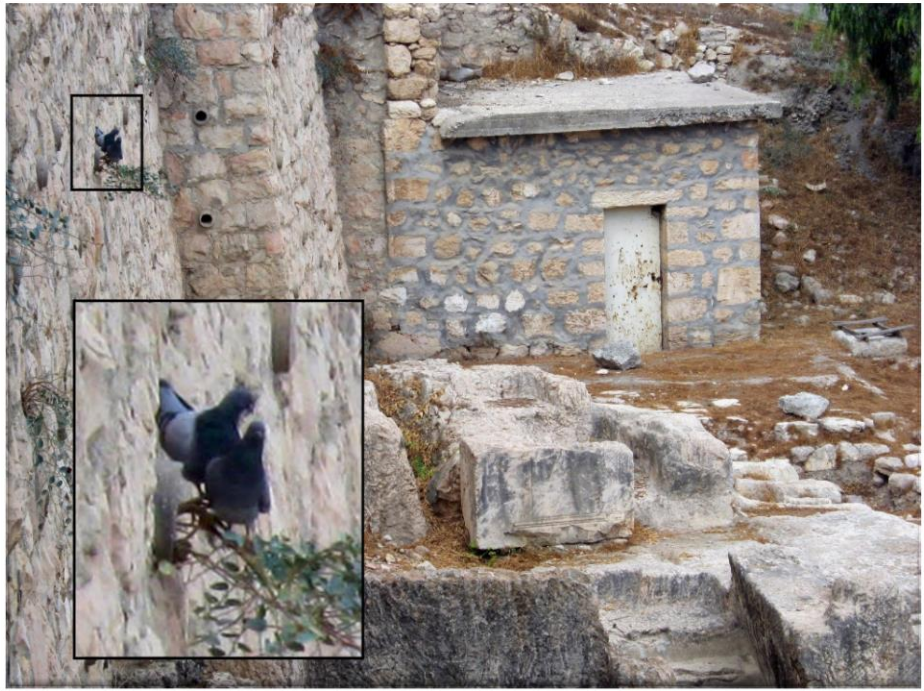
From hard experience, I had learned not to be hasty in following strong intuitions, but to subject them to prayer and discernment. The Song of Songs is one of my favorite books of Scripture, and I’ve always had a devotion to St. Mary of Magdala. Was this theme merely the fulfillment of what I wanted to do? Or was it something that would benefit the retreatants, and God wanted me to use my own love and knowledge? Providentially, I was leaving the next month for a 3-week retreat in Jerusalem. I planned on making the discernment of the retreat topic a priority during my time in the Holy Land. As I walked the streets of Jerusalem, the structure of the retreat began to take shape.

The culmination of my discernment occurred at the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu (Latin for “cock’s crow.”) This was the site of the High Priest Caiaphas’s palace and the location of St. Peter’s threefold denial of Christ (Mark 14:30.) On Holy Thursday night before the Crucifixion, Jesus was brought into the courtyard of Caiaphas for questioning. Peter also received some questions about his relationship with Jesus, and he denied that he ever knew him. According to tradition, Jesus was imprisoned underground near the palace for the rest of the night.

This underground prison is reached by way of the lowest chapel of the church. It is a quiet and atmospheric place to pray, and there are few visitors. Faint Byzantine crosses from the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. can be seen on the walls.



As I finished my prayer and left the prison, I ascended the excavated steps that were most likely the same ones that Jesus used as he and his followers walked from the Upper Room down to Gethsemane, and again as he was led up from the prison. As I looked at a stone wall on the right, I saw three doves resting in a cleft of the rock:



Well, here I must admit some poetic license: there were three *pigeons* in a hole of a stone wall. My mind raced along with my heart. “Aren’t pigeons a type of dove? This isn’t some wall of a modern brick house, this is a wall right by the prison of Christ! Could this be a definitive affirmation for the theme of the retreat?” I took a picture of the pigeons—doves?—and hurried away to find an Internet connection in order to check my hunch. It was correct: pigeons are also known as “rock doves”, and are of the same taxonomic family of Columbidae.

Deciding that this sign was not one to ignore, I went forward with the topic and preached the retreat. It went well, but I still had the desire to explore its themes more deeply. This book is the fruit of that desire.

# Introduction

I will allure her,  
lead her into the desert,  
and speak to her heart

Hosea 2:14

**T**HE HEART IS MADE FOR GOD. At the moment of conception, we were created by God with an inherent desire that can only be satisfied by union with his Heart.

The primary joy of Heaven will be the unrestrained, unveiled beholding of God. Reposing in the fire of Love itself, those in Heaven will never exhaust the wonder of the heart of God. Saints have always declared that we need not wait until death severs us from this earthly life in order to have some experience of the felicity of Heaven. If we are in the state of grace, then the Trinity is indwelling within the soul. And where the Trinity goes, Heaven follows.

This life does not, however, make finding the heart of God an easy task. Blinded by our own sins, the weakness of our fallen nature, and

enemies seen and unseen, we behold God “through a glass, darkly.”<sup>1</sup> When he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul expressed the frustration of love’s desires not being satiated. He continued that in Heaven, God will be seen “face to face...then shall I know even as also I am known.”<sup>2</sup>

The lover desires to know her beloved and to be known. This book is an attempt to illuminate the path and the goal of the love of God. Nothing in it is novel. From the nearly endless mine of spiritual riches in the Catholic Church, I have selected a few veins of ore that speak directly to my heart and encourage me to continue climbing the path of sanctity. I have done my best to organize these gems into a story of the path of the soul that thirsts for her God.

### **The Intended Audience**

Some readers might be uncertain that this book, based on a retreat for consecrated women, would be applicable to them. It is true that a married person will not walk the same path as a celibate. A married person will find their sanctity with and through their spouse (and any children they are given.) A consecrated person, because they do not have an earthly spouse, binds their heart directly to Christ. The Church, like her Lord, has always esteemed the consecrated life as a radically direct means of seeking God.<sup>3</sup>

However, even though there are differences in their respective paths, both married and celibate persons are called to a profound union with

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12, King James Version of the Bible (hereafter “KJV”)

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 19:12, 1 Corinthians 7:32

God. Union with one's spouse is part of a married person's spiritual journey, but on the deepest level their hearts are alone with God. Therefore, the principles in this text are for all who desire to grow in their spiritual life. This also applies to those who are discerning their vocation, the widowed, and all others— sanctity is the ultimate goal for us all.

Let us now awaken and be naked in our understanding, and ask him to show us his face. Let us hasten, our hearts enkindled, to seek and meet the bridegroom.

# The Song of Songs

Only the touch of the Spirit can inspire a song like this,  
and only personal experience can unfold its meaning.

Let those who are versed in the mystery revel in it;  
let all others burn with desire  
rather to attain to this experience  
than merely to learn about it<sup>1</sup>

St. Bernard of Clairvaux

**W**E TURN NOW TO THE SONG OF SONGS, the mystical book par excellence. Even though it is only eight chapters long, spiritual authors of the ages have treasured this book, and they poured out their talents in their attempts to plumb its depths. It can provide us with a nearly endless supply of mystical food. And yet, the Song of Songs is essentially a love poem. The physical descriptions within it do not, at first glance, offer profound spiritual insights. Why would spiritual writers, most of them celibate, extol this most earthly and sensual biblical book?

<sup>1</sup> Patrick Geary, ed., *Readings in Medieval History: The Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 345.

Before investigating this apparent contradiction, it will be helpful to understand the Song of Songs historically and structurally. The Song goes by several names—The Song of Solomon, the Canticle of Canticles, the Song of Songs. The names point to two elements that have been traditionally attributed to the book: its author was King Solomon, and it is the paramount achievement of love poetry.

The literal description of the book is that it “describes the love for each other of Solomon and the Sulamitess in lyrico-dramatic scenes and reciprocal songs.” The woman in the Song is transformed from a shepherdess to a queen as she and the king proclaim their love for one another.<sup>2</sup>

In both Judaism and Christianity, the book has usually been interpreted as an allegory. For Jews, the Song of Songs describes the love between God and Israel; for Christians, the allegory interprets Christ as the bridegroom and the Church as his bride. Beginning with the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century theologian Origen, mystics have tended to understand the Song as a description of the love between Christ and the individual soul.<sup>3</sup> It is this understanding that will be utilized in this book.

Many Church Fathers, such as St. Ambrose and St. Gregory of Nyssa, treasured the Song of Solomon and wrote commentaries on it. Some of them saw in the Wisdom Trilogy of Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs—a reflection of the three ages of the spiritual life. The three ages are the progressive stages that the soul encounters in its journey of conversion. The first stage is the *purgative*—

<sup>2</sup> Ezum, Jo Cheryl, *Song of Songs: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 75.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

the soul attempts to purge not only sin but whatever leads to sin. If this is done with fidelity, love, and perseverance, the soul is normally led to the *illuminative* stage, where God works deep within the soul to correct its desires and teach it the ways of holiness. Finally, the soul may be blessed to enter the *unitive* stage, of which even saints are hesitant to attempt description. Abbot Paphnutius, an Egyptian Desert Father from the 4th century, spoke of these three levels and their correspondence with Solomon's writings:

To these three sorts of renunciations the three books of Solomon suitably correspond. For Proverbs answers to the first renunciation, as in it the desires for carnal things and earthly sins are repressed; to the second Ecclesiastes corresponds, as there everything which is done under the sun is declared to be vanity; to the third the Song of Songs, in which the soul soaring above all things visible, is actually joined to the word of God by the contemplation of heavenly things.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, when the three books are compared it is apparent that the Song of Songs is the most earthly and, on a literal level, the least spiritual of the three. There is no mention of God, the Covenant, or the Law. Yet the Song is used to describe the very highest spiritual stage—the union of the soul with God.

A reason for this might be found in the limitations of how we can understand the love of God. According to St. Anselm, God is “that than

<sup>4</sup> *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 11 of the Second Series, translated by Edgar C.S. Gibson, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1894), 322.



which nothing greater can be conceived.”<sup>5</sup> He “dwells in unapproachable light.”<sup>6</sup> Even St. Thomas Aquinas, arguably the greatest of theologians and one who truly tasted of the deep well of sanctity, found a limit to his understanding. While celebrating Mass, he had a profound mystical experience. When trying to describe what happened to his friend Brother Reginald, he could only say, “All that I have written seems to me as so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me.”<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that it is impossible to state any truths about God, but that his very nature, Who He Is, can never be fully grasped. Just because St. Thomas’s words appeared so inadequate in comparison to a glimpse of God’s goodness does not mean that the words are false; it is simply that God overwhelms our words. Those who write about God must keep in mind two truths: God can be described, but never described fully.

The Song of Songs is a beautiful example of man’s attempt to describe the love of God in a limited form. It uses marital imagery to extol the union of God and the soul in the most intimate manner that humanity understands. By equating the fire of romantic love with the thirst of the soul for God, it gives us some clue into just how all-consuming and passionate a relationship with God can be. Some have called the book too explicit, but throughout the centuries both Jews and Christians have defended it against this charge. This guarding of the Song of Songs from a base understanding was forcefully made by Rabbi Akiva ben Jo-

<sup>5</sup> Velasquez, Manuel G., *Philosophy, a Text with Readings* (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2014), 243.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 6:16, Revised Standard Version of the Bible (hereafter “RSV.”)

<sup>7</sup> Cummings, Owen F., *Eucharistic Doctors: A Theological History* (New York: Paulist, 2005), 127.

seph (A.D. 40-137.) He wrote, “He who sings the Song of Songs in wine taverns, treating it as if it were a vulgar song, forfeits his share in the world to come.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Phipps, William E., “The Plight of the Song of Songs,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 42, no. 1 (1974): 89.

# Mary of Magdala

She lived in solitude,  
and now in solitude has built her nest;  
and in solitude he guides her,  
he alone, who also bears  
in solitude the wound of love<sup>1</sup>

St. John of the Cross

**A**S I PONDERED THE THEME of the retreat, I could not think of a better patroness than St. Mary Magdalene. Her patronage was especially relevant for a retreat given to consecrated women: these women most directly mirror the nuptial love of Christ and the soul, and Mary Magdalene is one of the most perfect examples of a soul in love with God.

Even if Mary Magdalene's love of Jesus Christ is never in question, there is still much debate over her identity. She is usually referred to as "Mary Magdalene," but is also called "Mary of Magdala" or simply "The Magdalene." One theory is that she was from the ancient Gentile

<sup>1</sup> St. John of the Cross, "The Spiritual Canticle," in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 476.

town of Magdala (or Magadan) on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. She was a Jew, but the area she lived in was heavily influenced by other cultures. In Luke 8:2, she is simply called “Magdalene.” This title’s root in Hebrew, מגדל (“migdal”), translates as “tower” or “fortress.”<sup>2</sup> Her name may also refer to a “Talmudic expression meaning ‘curling women’s hair,’ which the Talmud explains as of an adulteress.”<sup>3</sup>

In the four gospels, there are few specific mentions of Mary Magdalene, but there are numerous stories of unnamed female penitents and repentant women with the name of “Mary.” Controversy is still ongoing over which of these stories actually refer to Mary Magdalene. We will first look at the clear references to Mary Magdalene in the gospels, and then investigate the other possible associations.

Luke 8:2 says that Jesus Christ cast seven devils from Mary Magdalene. She took her stand near the foot of the cross,<sup>4</sup> and she watched as the dead Jesus was laid into the tomb.<sup>5</sup> She was the first witness of the resurrection,<sup>6</sup> and she was the first to tell the Apostles that Christ was risen.<sup>7</sup> It was this proclamation of the Good News that led St. Thomas Aquinas to exclaim, “Just as a woman had announced the words of death to the first man, so also a woman was the first to announce to the

<sup>2</sup> *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Mary Magdalene,” accessed August 6, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary\\_Magdalene](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene).

<sup>3</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. “St. Mary Magdalene,” by Hugh Pope, accessed August 6, 2014, <http://newadvent.org/cathen/09761a.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> John 19:25

<sup>5</sup> Mark 15:47

<sup>6</sup> John 20:11

<sup>7</sup> John 20:18

Apostles the word of life.” Because of this, he bestowed upon her the title, “Apostle to the Apostles.”<sup>8</sup>

Besides these explicit mentions of Mary of Magdala, attempts have been made to associate other gospel stories with her person. The Eastern, Western, and Protestant churches took differing views. The Catholic Church tended to conflate Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany (sister of Martha and Lazarus) and with the penitent woman who anointed Jesus’s feet with her tears.<sup>9</sup> This view became very popular after the sixth century, when Pope Gregory the Great made those associations in his 33<sup>rd</sup> homily:

It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer’s feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to

<sup>8</sup> *The Vatican*, s.v. “2-14-07 General Audience of Pope Benedict XVI,” accessed August 6, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/audiences/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20070214\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070214_en.html).

<sup>9</sup> Luke 7:36-50

virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.<sup>10</sup>

As western culture developed, this conflation of stories with the person of Mary Magdalene led to an explosion of paintings, writings, legends, and even religious orders. The Middle Ages were an especially fervent period of devotion to her. The 1969 revision of the liturgical calendar of the Catholic Church attempted to change some of these devotional associations. The new calendar separated the feast days of St. Mary Magdalene (July 22) and St. Mary of Bethany (July 29). The Church also removed the title of “penitent” from Mary Magdalene’s feast day. This separation of the “Marys” is in line with the Greek Fathers’ tendency to view them as different women, a view which became the norm for the Eastern Church. The Eastern Church traditionally saw Mary Magdalene as a peerlessly virtuous woman. One tradition says that her virtue was so great that Satan thought she might have been the Virgin who would bear the Christ; thus, he sent seven demons to torment her.<sup>11</sup>

It is beyond the focus of this text to delve any further into these controversies of identification. Indeed, the purpose of this book is to invite the soul into a deeper union with God under the patronage and example of St. Mary Magdalene. I believe that it is possible to draw upon all of these stories and legends about her in order to look at the spiritual lessons that they teach. The strictness of the scholar is not necessary here, as we wish to call upon the whole panoply of art, literature, and piety.

<sup>10</sup> Carl E. Olson and Sandra Miesel, *The Da Vinci Hoax: Exposing the Errors in the Da Vinci Code* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 82.

<sup>11</sup> *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Mary Magdalene.”

Therefore, I am going to follow the example of St. Gregory the Great and consider that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, and the sinful woman are all the same person. Some might take offense at a possibly incorrect pairing of Mary Magdalene with someone she is not, but I don't think she would be too upset. I will certainly take the risk of having to explain myself to her should I ever enter Heaven.

I will also take the risk of utilizing a beautiful French legend about Mary Magdalene. The legend states that the three “Friends of Bethany”— Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Lazarus (now a bishop)—were imprisoned after the martyrdom of St. James. Instead of being executed, they were put into a boat and abandoned at sea. Having no rudder or sail, the boat drifted to Marseilles. The three siblings then set about converting Provence. After some time, feeling the need for an uninterrupted union with God, Mary Magdalene retired to a forlorn cave on a hill called Sainte Baume. For the next 30 years until her death, she lived a life of deep prayer, reclusion, and penance. This grotto with a relic of her skull was reconsecrated in 1822. As mentioned above, we will accept this tradition, as she and her cave will have much to teach us.<sup>12</sup>

The theme has been presented, and the background information is complete. We now prepare our hearts to become doves, to follow the example of our contemplative dove, St. Mary Magdalene. Resting in the rock of her hermitage, pondering the immensity of the Love she has found, she can almost hear the Beloved's voice:

<sup>12</sup> *EWTN*, s.v. “The Relics of Saint Marie-Magdalene at *La Sainte Baume*,” translated by Deacon E. Scott Borgman, accessed August 6, 2014, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CHISTORY/relicsmarmagdal.htm>.

*You have wounded my heart, my sister, my spouse.  
You have wounded my heart with one of your glances.<sup>13</sup>*

<sup>13</sup> Song of Songs 4:9, translation mine





**The Cave of St. Mary Magdalene**

# Awake in the Night

I slept, but my heart was awake

Song of Songs 5:2

**B**APTISM IS THE SACRAMENT OF ENTRY into the Trinitarian life. We who have received baptism have been reconciled to God, and joined to the Body of Christ. We have found the God who created us and never abandoned us, even when we were “drinking sin like water.”<sup>1</sup> God redeemed us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and has cleansed us of our sins.

Why must we seek God again if we already believe? We must seek because of our sin and our forgetfulness. When we choose to sin, we show that we do not yet know him as he is, and the truth has not penetrated the depths of the heart. As St. John wrote in his first letter, “He who says, ‘I know him’ but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”<sup>2</sup> These words of Scripture—words of truth—are jarring. They illustrate the radical and complete call to sanctity for all believers. There would be a temptation to consider the goal impossi-

<sup>1</sup> A Monk, *The Hermitage Within*, translated by Alan Neame (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1999), 30.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:4, RSV

ble to reach were it not for the teaching that sin can vary in its seriousness. If I am tired and speak abruptly to a friend, it has far different consequences for our relationship than if I punch him.

Yet St. John also writes in that same letter, “If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”<sup>3</sup> Meditating on how we are strung between these two poles of criticism, we become aware that we cannot rest on this road to holiness, and the time that we have to make it to the summit is getting short.

We must also seek because we forget the simplest things. We forget the fundamentals, the basics of the spiritual life, and our hearts become fat and sluggish. We desire arcane wisdom and trivia, and like to put off the real work that needs to be done in the soul. Sublime, pure truth raises merely a yawn.

And so, God in his mercy will often reach out and rouse us from our sleepy complacency. When we sit up in our bed of mediocrity and start to see things clearly, we are not content with ourselves. Fortunately, this is the starting point of our search. As the Venerable Fulton Sheen wrote, “Whenever there is discontent, God is stirring the waters of the soul.”<sup>4</sup> We must then make the decision not to throw away this grace, but to rise and continue climbing.

The Beloved in the Song echoes this rising from sleep in one of the most mysterious and lyrically beautiful passages of scripture:

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 1:10

<sup>4</sup> “Problems in Marriage,” Lecture, *Your Life is Worth Living*.

Bride:

*I slept, but my heart was awake.*

*Hark! my beloved is knocking.*

Beloved:

*Open to me, my sister, my love,*

*my dove, my perfect one;*

*for my head is wet with dew,*

*my locks with the drops of the night.*

Bride:

*I had put off my garment,*

*how could I put it on?*

*I had bathed my feet,*

*how could I soil them?*

*My beloved thrust his hand through the opening,*

*and my heart was thrilled within me.*

*I arose to open to my beloved,*

*and my hands dripped with myrrh,*

*my fingers with liquid myrrh,*

*upon the handles of the bolt.<sup>5</sup>*

Verse by verse, a picture begins to form. *I slept, but my heart was awake.* The bride's heart is still listening for the voice of God, and yet she sleeps. Perhaps she has become drowsy because of an attachment to her own comforts, and has forgotten to stay awake in case her Beloved arrives at an hour she is not expecting.

<sup>5</sup> Song of Songs 5:2-5 (verse 5:4 is my translation)

*Hark! my beloved is knocking.* The Beloved approaches her dwelling in the night, and this passage recalls the words of Jesus in Revelation: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him....”<sup>6</sup> Not content with merely knocking at the door, the Beloved calls, *Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one....* His titles for her emanate the desire within his own heart. He continues, *For my head is wet with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.* The Beloved has stood for quite some time at the threshold of her dwelling, knocking and calling for her. His desire for her attention will not be put off by discomfort, the passage of time, or any thought that she will refuse to open.

*I had put off my garment, how could I put it on? I had bathed my feet, how could I soil them?* As she lies in the dark, she ponders the discomfort of leaving the warmth of her bed, dressing, and then soiling her feet as she walks across the room to open to her Beloved. His presence and promises of affection are not yet enough to rouse her out of her complacency. Her delay in opening the door shows the extent that her heart still clings to her own pleasures and will, and does not wholly belong to her Beloved.

*My beloved thrust his hand through the opening, and my heart was thrilled within me.* This is the verse that serves as the hinge between what came before in this passage, and what comes after. While she lies in bed and contemplates whether rising is worth the effort, the Beloved boldly shoves his hand through an opening in the door. Many translations will describe the Beloved as touching the handle or door latch, but the He-

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 3:20

brew word שָׁלַח, transliterated as “shalach,” is often translated as “to send.”<sup>7</sup> And so, her Beloved literally “sends forth” his hand. Her reaction to seeing this is a deep thrilling within her. Older English translations, such as the King James or the Douay-Rheims versions, used the word “bowels” instead of heart. Not only does “bowels” bring to mind the deepest recesses of something, but the archaic understanding of this word points to a seat of emotion, such as pity or tenderness.<sup>8</sup>

Meditating upon this passage and substituting the soul and Christ for the bride and the Beloved, we see a deep exposition of the interior life. The soul has heard the call of its Lord, but sits in a state of indecision. It is seemingly comfortable and warm, but it is alone. Suddenly, Christ sends forth an unmistakable dart of grace into the soul. This might be a deep consolation, a word of Wisdom, or even a sudden awareness of insufficiency. The soul then thrills (“rumbles” is a particularly evocative translation of the Hebrew) to his touch, and decides it is time to make a choice.

*I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt. As she rises and walks to the door, the aromatic perfume myrrh is in such abundance on her hands that it is dripping off. This is not simply a poetic detail.*

If we are interpreting this passage as a call to awaken to a deeper spiritual life, then where might the bride (the soul) be resting if she is

<sup>7</sup> *Bible Tools*, s.v. “Greek/Hebrew Definitions,” accessed August 6, 2014, <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/ID/h7971/page/2>.

<sup>8</sup> James N. Lapsley, Brian H. Childs, and David W. Waanders, eds., *The Treasure of Earthen Vessels: Explorations in Theological Anthropology in Honor of James N. Lapsley* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 250.

covered in myrrh? The Gospel of John records that Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes that weighed 100 pounds in order to anoint the body of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> One of the main uses of myrrh in biblical times was to anoint the dead for burial. Could the soul be in a tomb?

This imagery would match what St. John of the Cross wrote about the Night of the Spirit. The Night of the Spirit is an advanced stage of spiritual development where the soul is unable to progress any further on its own, and God performs hidden, painful healings in order to free it from its limitations of understanding.<sup>10</sup> St. John of the Cross writes of this stage, “It feels as if it [the soul] were swallowed by a beast...it is fitting that the soul be in this *sepulcher of dark death* [emphasis mine] in order that it attain the spiritual resurrection for which it hopes.”<sup>11</sup> The soul, buried in its futility to progress any further in love of God, must wait for the command of its Beloved to call it forth into the next step of its journey. Only God can work the resurrection of her spirit that is required for her to progress further on the path of love.

If the tomb is an image of the Night of the Spirit, then the soul is there due to no fault of her own, as God has placed her there. But the soul could also be in a tomb of her own making. She could have entered the tomb of her own habits of sin, but God would still come to knock and call for her to rise and open the door to a resurrection of grace. We

<sup>9</sup> John 19:39

<sup>10</sup> Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, O.P., *The Three Ages of the Interior Life: Prelude of Eternal Life*, Volume 2 (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1989), 353-355.

<sup>11</sup> St. John of the Cross, “The Dark Night of the Soul,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 404.

now see that the Beloved, Jesus Christ, stands at the door as he also stood at the grave of Lazarus, commanding, “Lazarus, come out!”<sup>12</sup>

The Night of the Spirit is a stage that is reached by very few. When the soul emerges from the Night of the Spirit, it enters into the final stage of union with God, where it embraces its Lord in the closest contact that can occur this side of Heaven. For a soul in this Night, opening the door of her tomb leads to the finding and embracing of her Beloved.

What about the rest of us who are further down the path of holiness? We may not be in the tomb of the Night of the Spirit, but we certainly have found ourselves in tombs of our own making, caused by our choosing sin over God. If we choose to answer the call of repentance from our Beloved and open the door of conversion, what will we find? Will we see and embrace our Beloved? What happens when the bride in the Song opens the door?

*I opened to my beloved,  
but my beloved had turned and gone.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> John 11:43

<sup>13</sup> Song of Songs 5:6



# The Mountain

Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high?

Psalm 113:5

**I**n the midst of that night, in my darkness,  
I saw the awesome sight of Christ  
opening the heavens for me...

*Never before had I seen such things.*

*I was blind, you should know it, and I saw nothing...*

*My mind is completely astounded.*

*I tremble with fear...*

*I found him, the One whom I had seen from afar,  
the one whom Stephen saw when the heavens opened, and later whose  
vision blinded Paul.*

*Truly, he was as a fire in the center of my heart.*

*I was outside myself, broken down, lost to myself,*

*and unable to bear the unendurable brightness of that glory.  
And so, I turned and fled into the night of the senses.<sup>1</sup>*

In the last chapter, the bride made the act of the will to rise from her bed and open the door to a deeper life with her Beloved. As the hinges turned and she peered into the darkness, her heart pounding, there was no sign of him. Her heart woke her in the night because in its depths it had heard a call to come out of the tomb; was her heart lying to her? Has the Beloved's seeking and knocking all been a cruel trick?

We are faced with a great mystery. God has promised that if we earnestly seek the Beloved, He will make himself known to us. Jesus Christ, Truth incarnate, said, "For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds."<sup>2</sup> The bride seeks her Beloved, but does not find him. We ask God to show us his face, and, seemingly, he refuses. Is it possible to reconcile this collision of promise and experience?

Immediately after seeing that her Beloved is gone, the bride says:

*My soul failed me when he spoke.  
I sought him, but found him not;  
I called him, but he gave no answer.<sup>3</sup>*

Her words echo the passage at the beginning of this chapter. They were written a millennium ago by a Byzantine monk named Symeon the Theologian. In the night, he received a gift of *vision* from God, but he wrote of himself as *blinded* and seeing nothing, his mind astounded.

<sup>1</sup> Symeon the New Theologian in *The Book of Mystical Chapters*, translated by John Anthony McGuckin (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2002), 164.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:8

<sup>3</sup> Song of Songs 5:6

Symeon found the God of the Ages, but was unable to bear it. He compared his experience with that of Sts. Stephen and Paul. St. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, saw the glory of God as he was being martyred.<sup>4</sup> St. Paul, who consented to St. Stephen's martyrdom, was blinded by Christ at the beginning of his conversion.<sup>5</sup> Having grasped something of an experience of God, Symeon looked within and found the same brokenness and blindness as St. Paul. He desired perfect union with God, but did not find unity even within himself. Symeon's response was to turn from God and flee.

Many Christians of the modern era will find these words difficult to understand. Why did Symeon, a holy monk, flee the touch of God? Why would the bride's soul, when hearing the Word of the Beloved, fail her? If we have difficulty understanding these reactions, then perhaps we have lost sight of who God truly is. Perhaps we have reduced him to a safe, comfortable idea that fits our own understanding and desires.

Let us now follow Moses and the Israelites to Mount Sinai, and see how God met his people there:

And now the third day had come. Morning broke, and all at once thunder was heard, lightning shone out, and the mountain was covered with thick mist; loud rang the trumpet-blast, and the people in the camp were dismayed. But Moses brought them out from the camp itself to meet the Lord, and they stood there close by the spurs of the mountain. The whole of Mount

<sup>4</sup> Acts 7:56

<sup>5</sup> Acts 9

Sinai was by now wreathed in smoke, where the Lord had come down with fire about him, so that smoke went up as if from a furnace; it was a mountain full of terrors. Louder yet grew the noise of the trumpet, longer its blast; and then Moses spoke to the Lord, and the Lord's voice was heard in answer. It was on the very top of Mount Sinai that the Lord had come down, and now he called Moses up to the summit. When he had climbed up there he was bidden go down again, and warn the people not to pass beyond their bounds in their eagerness to see the Lord; or it might be that a great multitude of them would incur death.<sup>6</sup>

Mount Sinai is only a mountain, a hill of dead rock that is a speck on the globe. And yet this mere created thing, when touched by God, becomes a blasting inferno that shakes the people to their core. The Israelites had been warned not to come too close in their desire to see God, as the encounter would kill them. Initially they were eager to see God, but the actual experience of him gave them second thoughts:

Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die."<sup>7</sup>

This is the same God who invites us towards him. Like the monk Symeon, we may face the burning of his glory, find it too overwhelm-

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 19:16-21, Knox

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20:18, 19, RSV

ing, and run away. And yet, the mountain's peak is where union with God is found, and the mountain must be faced and summited. In the Book of Exodus, the warnings not to touch the mountain are not mere literary flourishes. The mountain will indeed kill all who touch it—it will kill what St. Paul calls the “old man,” the “body of sin.”<sup>8</sup> All of us suffer from both the wounded nature that we received from Adam and Eve, and the damage caused by our sins. This “old man,” this desire to serve ourselves rather than God, will not die easily or painlessly.

Thus far, this chapter has described a lofty goal, but a brutal road to get there. If the spectacle of the mountain were the only invitation, the only display of God that we received, how difficult it would be for us to begin the climb. The raw power and danger to self that the mountain represents would make many of us abstain from attempting the summit, however beautifully it is portrayed. Will God mercifully coax our soul in another way?

In the film *The Passion of the Christ*, there is a profound scene where Mary Magdalene, interpreted as the woman caught in adultery, desires to approach Jesus after he saved her from death by stoning. She is lying prostrate in the dust and covered with scratches and bruises. As she inches closer, she does not dare to even look at Jesus. Her hand hesitantly stretches towards him, and she gently grasps his foot. Holding onto him, she slowly lifts her eyes until she is looking him full in the face. Jesus then extends his hand to her, and lifts her upright.

Mary Magdalene is seeking to touch the very God that made a mountain so potent that nothing could touch it and live. Even an animal

<sup>8</sup> Romans 6:5-7

that touched its base had to be shot through with arrows or stoned to death.<sup>9</sup> Covered in the dirt and damage of her sins, Mary cannot bear the gaze of Jesus, even with his divinity veiled. Her grasping of his foot can be seen as a symbol of the beginning of her conversion, the beginning of her climb. Only this conversion will allow her to look upon him, take his hand, and arise.

Leaving behind the forbidding mountain for the moment, let us follow Mary Magdalene on her path of conversion. This path has led her into a garden, where she comes to anoint her dead Lord.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 19:13

# The Garden

Whom do you seek?

John 20:15

JESUS SAID TO HER, ‘WOMAN, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’”<sup>1</sup>

*Upon my bed by night  
I sought him whom my soul loves;  
I sought him, but found him not;  
I called him, but he gave no answer.*

*I will rise now and go about the city,  
in the streets and in the squares;  
I will seek him whom my soul loves.<sup>2</sup>*

Mary of Magdala’s interactions with Jesus changed her heart. Yet now he was in a tomb, and she was left heartbroken. Her Lord who had

<sup>1</sup> John 20:15

<sup>2</sup> Song 3:1,2

promised her a new life, who had proclaimed that he was Life itself, was dead.

She had been there on the day he died. She was one of the few disciples who fearlessly stayed with him and comforted him during his Passion. Remaining by the side of the Virgin Mary and John, she watched as her Beloved was tortured and brutalized. The signs of wonder that accompanied his death were of little comfort. Her Jesus was gone.

After the crucifixion and burial, as the evening marking the beginning of the Sabbath approached, Mary Magdalene would have remembered her cultural obligation to return to his tomb for three days to mourn.<sup>3</sup> The third day, “when rabbinic tradition held that mourning for the dead was at its greatest,”<sup>4</sup> we can picture her lying on her bed in an agony of tears, pondering all that had happened. She looks to the East for the lifting of the darkness, eager to “rise...and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares,”<sup>5</sup> carrying her jar of myrrh, making her way to his tomb.

It appears that none of the disciples truly understood the promise that Jesus would rise on the third day. This is evidenced by their bewilderment when the reports came in that his body was missing. Mary Magdalene herself, when she saw that his body was no longer in the

<sup>3</sup> *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Myrrhbearers,” accessed August 6, 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myrrhbearers>.

<sup>4</sup> Bishop Arthur Seratelli, *Diocese of Paterson, New Jersey*, s.v. “The Passion and Mary Magdalene: At the Empty Tomb,” accessed August 6, 2014, [www.patersondiocese.org/hpage.cfm?Web\\_ID=1327](http://www.patersondiocese.org/hpage.cfm?Web_ID=1327).

<sup>5</sup> Song of Songs 3:2



tomb, immediately suspected that someone had taken him away.<sup>6</sup> Should we question the intensity of her love because of this confusion?

Mary knew that the last place her Beloved was seen was in the tomb. Because of this, she wanted to be there as much as possible, even at the risk of great danger. She would not hide from fear and shame like St. Peter and the other apostles. Instead, she would start for the tomb as soon as there was enough light to see the path, and she would pay no attention to the heckling of the guards stationed by the grave. This was the greatness of her devotion. Her courage and steadfastness show that, even though her understanding of the Resurrection was imperfect and veiled, her love was immense.

After running to tell the disciples that Jesus's body is missing, she comes back to the tomb with Peter and John. They leave after seeing the empty tomb, but Mary stays. There is much that happens at this point of the Gospel of John, and much that could be meditated upon. Let us look at verse 15: "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'"<sup>7</sup>

Mary seeks Christ in a garden, and she finds him as a gardener. Many gospel commentators and preachers have taken the viewpoint that Jesus had veiled his appearance, and so Mary saw him as a stranger in the garden. Therefore, they say that her mistaking him for a gardener was only a logical deduction on her part.

<sup>6</sup> John 20:2

<sup>7</sup> John 20:15

However, as mentioned in section 539 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Jesus is the new Adam.<sup>8</sup> The figure of Adam in the garden calls to mind the words of Genesis 2:15: “So the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of delight, to cultivate and tend it.” Perhaps Mary Magdalene’s seeing Jesus as a gardener is not just a case of mistaken identity, but holds deeper truths.

I first encountered this possibility in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This church is built on the location of Christ’s crucifixion, anointing, burial, and resurrection. Near the tomb is the traditional site where Mary Magdalene met Jesus in the garden. On a column is a small framed painting that shows this meeting. Mary finding Jesus in the garden is a popular theme in religious artwork, and is usually titled “*Noli Me Tangere*” (Latin for “Touch Me Not.”<sup>9</sup>) The painting in the Holy Sepulchre, though, breaks from the traditional portrayals. Jesus is explicitly shown as a gardener—he is wearing a large-brimmed hat and carries a garden hoe over his shoulder:

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> John 20:17



*This photo was graciously provided by Fr. Eamon Kelly, LC*

I was interested to see if this painting was an anomaly. In my research, I found that no less an artist than Titian originally portrayed the encounter in this manner. His 1514 painting does not presently show Jesus dressed as a gardener, but x-rays of its layers of paint show that he originally portrayed Jesus with a gardener's hat.<sup>10</sup>

Using this artistic license, some compelling possibilities arise if we consider Jesus Christ as the Risen Gardener. St. Paul proclaims that, "Christ has been raised from the dead, the *first fruits* of those who have fallen asleep."<sup>11</sup> Through his death and resurrection, Jesus transforms the grave into a place of life. Instead of tombs being places of corruption, they will now be fertile ground for those who are found in him.

Jesus Christ has conquered and transformed death and the grave, and he stands in a new paradise. In the program "The Last Adam," Fr. Thomas Hopko relates that Adam and Eve were placed "in a garden that is called *paradise* in the Greek Scripture, and that paradise meant that they were in that reality where life was created to be a joyful life, a beautiful life." He goes on to say that, through his cross, Jesus "transforms it [Golgotha] into paradise."<sup>12</sup> Jesus, the new Adam, wants us to dwell in this garden, this paradise, as well.

The true garden of paradise is Heaven, but one of the fundamental teachings of the spiritual life is that Heaven is accessible even now. If the baptized soul is in the state of grace, then God dwells there, and all of Heaven is with him. As St. Therese of Lisieux once wrote, "He

<sup>10</sup> *The National Gallery*, s.v. "Noli Me Tangere," accessed August 6, 2014, <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-noli-me-tangere>.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:20, emphasis mine

<sup>12</sup> Fr. Thomas Hopko, "The Last Adam," Ancient Faith Radio, June 14, 2009.

comes to find another Heaven, the Heaven of our soul in which He loves to dwell.”<sup>13</sup> She also compared souls to flowers in “our Lord’s living garden.”<sup>14</sup> God tends and nurtures each soul so that it might glorify him.

Once we give him permission to do his work in us, God fully expects us to work alongside him in the tending of our soul. St. Teresa of Avila wrote:

Let the beginner [in the life of prayer] think of herself as a gardener who is preparing to plant a garden for the delight of her Beloved. But the soil is barren and full of noxious weeds. His Majesty himself pulls up the weeds and replaces them with good seed. Bear in mind that the minute the soul sets out on the path of prayer and service, God has already begun to cultivate her soil in this way.<sup>15</sup>

There are numerous struggles, dangers, and triumphs that the soul will find in this work of cultivation. In the words of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Egyptian monk St. Macarius the Great:

The heart itself is only a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil; there are rough and uneven roads; there are precipices.

<sup>13</sup> Jill Haak Adels, *The Wisdom of the Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 82.

<sup>14</sup> *Good Reads*, s.v. “Therese de Lisieux”, accessed August 6, 2014, [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/248952.Th\\_r\\_se\\_de\\_Lisieux](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/248952.Th_r_se_de_Lisieux).

<sup>15</sup> *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life*, translated by Mirabai Starr (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2007), 73.

But there, too, are God and the angels; life is there, and the Kingdom; there, too, is light, and there the apostles, and heavenly cities, and treasures of grace.

All things lie within that little space.<sup>16</sup>

It is time to get to work.

<sup>16</sup> McGuckin, *Book of Mystical Chapters*, 54.

# The Turning of the Soil

Do not deceive yourselves with idle hopes that in the world to come you will find life if you have not tried to find it in the present world<sup>1</sup>

Theophanis the Recluse

**T**HE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS NOT PASSIVE. Throughout the Bible, the believer is tasked with taking up his cross, following Christ, serving the needy, asking forgiveness, resisting temptation, praying to God, interceding for others, protecting the innocent. It is a cooperative effort between the soul and God. It is an effort that relies on the constant gift of grace, but also demands a constant response.

A question now arises as we follow Mary Magdalene from her garden encounter: If our soul is a garden, and Mary looked for and found Jesus in a garden, then why would she spend her life in a barren cave in the south of France? Perhaps an answer is found in the very words of Jesus in the garden. Soon after Mary realizes that her Lord is alive, he

<sup>1</sup> *Not of this World: A Treasury of Christian Mysticism*, edited by James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc., 2003), 11.

gently rebukes her by saying, “Do not cling to me.”<sup>2</sup> After the joy of finding her Beloved, he says that she cannot hold onto him. His words seem abrupt and unfeeling; few of us could tolerate hearing them from a loved one. Why would Jesus treat her in this manner?

Mary Magdalene is given a tremendous gift—she is the first to see the risen Lord. But she is witnessing only the very beginning of what is to come, both for the Church and for herself. It is now the time for all of the disciples, including Mary Magdalene, to go forth and convert not only themselves, but the world. The Holy Spirit will soon descend upon them and give them the courage they will need for the struggle ahead. This encounter in the garden will give Mary consolation and strength throughout her entire life, but she cannot remain there. Jesus is calling her to a deeper conversion, and this will take great effort and sacrifice on her part.

Mary Magdalene knew from experience that even earthly delights are the merest glimpse of the splendors to be found in Christ. Still, why would she seek a lonely, barren cave as the place to work out her salvation?<sup>3</sup> If we continue with seeing Mary Magdalene as a woman who was held captive by sensuality, an answer begins to form. Not only would fleeing to a cave remove her from many sources of temptation, but it would remove her from just about everything else. Thus, she would have little choice but to engage in her spiritual combat. She would live out the words of Theophanis the Recluse: “Descend with your attention into the heart, stand there before the Lord and admit

<sup>2</sup> John 20:17, Knox

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:12



nothing sinful to enter...this is the entire activity of inner warfare.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, she is imitating her Beloved’s 40 days of temptation in the desert, and setting an example for all the spiritual seekers who would follow after her.

What about those of us who are not called to dwell in a cave as a hermit? Does the image of an interior struggle still apply? We may not be called to a transformation of life that is worked out in solitude, but we are still called to a transformation of life. There is one goal of every human life, and that goal is the holiness (“purity of heart”) without which we will not see God.<sup>5</sup> And so, all of us are called to work in the garden of our souls so that we might become like the Beloved.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, we are not alone in our work: God is always with us. As St. John of the Cross advised, “Enter within the heart, and work in the presence of your bridegroom, who is always present, loving you.”<sup>6</sup> Our efforts are miniscule compared with the tremendous renovations that grace can accomplish. Yet because his greatest works are usually accomplished in suffering (such as the Night of the Senses and the Night of the Spirit), we can grow impatient with the struggle.

Many of us, after receiving an interior push of grace to start working the soil of our garden, get a few tools together and pull a few weeds. The joy of moving down the path of conversion is fresh in our minds,

<sup>4</sup> *Orthodox Wiki*, s.v. “Theophan the Recluse,” accessed August 6, 2014, [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Theophan\\_the\\_Recluse](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Theophan_the_Recluse).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:8

<sup>6</sup> St. John of the Cross, “Sayings of Light and Love,” in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991), 92.

and we are convinced that all is smooth sailing and we will leap from glory to glory. After a small amount of time, we stop and look around. Our hands sting from the thorns and the sweat burns our eyes. We look up and see our neighbors in their backyard having a great time. They are not worried about how overgrown and corrupted their garden has become. Their life, the life that we used to live, now appears overwhelmingly attractive. We sit back to rest and ponder. Certainly our garden looks “good enough.” It’s not beautiful or organized, but it’s not a terrible mess like the one next door. Perhaps everything is fine just the way it is.

This is one reason why our work of conversion must be ongoing throughout our lives. We are often tempted to grow slack in our interior life. Our thoughts often turn to the “onions and garlic of Egypt”<sup>7</sup>—the pleasures of the sinful life we have left behind— and we start to build a false idol of our own standard of sanctity. “Certainly,” we think, “it’s not good to overdo things or become a fanatic.” We look at our little idol of our “holy self” and think, “That’s quite nice, isn’t it?” In his mercy, God soon comes along to smash the idol of mediocrity and realign our understanding of the goal.

I was reminded of this “realignment lesson” by an experience in basic training in the United States Air Force. One of the requirements of basic training was regular latrine, or bathroom, inspections. We were new recruits and were told to get the latrine in order for our first inspection that night. We were sure that we knew the amount of cleanliness that was required. After much labor, we were ready—the latrine was perfectly cleaned. The training instructor marched into the latrine

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 11:5

to perform the inspection. After walking around the showers and looking into the stalls, he promptly shut off all of the lights and got down on his hands and knees. Taking out a flashlight, he shined the light across the floor. “Get down here and look at this mess,” he hissed. “Did any of you even bother to clean anything? You’ve failed; next time, you’d better pass.” We learned a lesson and were shown the true standard. We did not fail another inspection.

God often does the same thing as that instructor in the Air Force. He’ll pull the veil back a bit and illuminate our heart. Just enough of his overwhelming presence strikes deep into those recesses that have not been converted, and we see the truth. These illuminations can be painful. In their light, we finally see the idol that we have constructed regarding our own successes and our own pride at being “a pretty good person—better than most.” God gets down on the floor of our soul, shines the light, and says, “Look at this mess. You didn’t notice this before, but now you see it. It must be cleaned up.” We then stop looking at our neighbors, take up our shovel and rake, and get back to work.

One of the very best ways to labor in our garden is one that actually requires little work. This way is adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. God in his infinite mercy has fulfilled his promise that he would “be with [us] always.”<sup>8</sup> When we are in the presence of the consecrated host, whether it is in a tabernacle or exposed in a monstrance, we are with the very same glorified Christ who told his disciples, “Peace be

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:20

with you.”<sup>9</sup> All that is required of us is a simple gaze and a will that is fixed on him.

It is with good reason that the center of the monstrance is called the “oculus”—the eye. We look upon the one that we have pierced with our sins, and he looks upon us with mercy. Over time, the words of St. Gregory of Nyssa will ring true: “You will become what he is by looking at him.”<sup>10</sup> Even if our thoughts are scattered and our will wanders, being near him will affect us. A priest once compared adoration with sitting on a block of uranium: “You might not feel anything, but you'd better believe that you're being changed.”

This gazing upon Christ also helps reshape our hearts. St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, “Let no earthly occupation bend down the mind that is raised on high by faith.”<sup>11</sup> If our lives have been immersed in vice, then our souls will be bent towards earthly things. It will be painful even to attempt to raise our heads and look at the things of Heaven. Like a warped piece of wood, it will require time, pressure, and a skilled hand to straighten us out. This is why asceticism and the carrying of the cross have always gone hand-in-hand with the hidden work of grace.

Desiring to grow in virtue and nearness to God is the first step, but the working of the soil will also require sacrifice. What real love is there that has not asked some sacrifice from the beloved? When a mother rises at three in the morning to feed her baby, she no doubt would rather be

<sup>9</sup> John 20:21

<sup>10</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, translated by Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 71.

<sup>11</sup> St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Sermon 24*, edited by Darrell Wright, accessed August 6, 2014, <http://archive.org/details/St.BernardOnTheSongOfSongs>.

back in bed. Her will to do what is best for her baby is what makes this action one of true love, for love is found in the will. We should follow her example and not become disappointed when our feelings fail us in prayer. If our will is fixed on God in spite of our feelings, our sacrifice becomes even more precious.

Because prayer is a requirement for all of us, let us try to make our prayer a full and complete sacrifice to God. When we pray well, we offer God the sacrifice of our intellect (we direct our thoughts to him instead of other things), our will (we direct our desire towards him), our time, and our body. Instead of frittering away our time in prayer with distractions and fruitless reading, may we ask God for the grace to make our prayer a holocaust upon his altar—an offering that is completely consumed, fragrant and acceptable to him. With time, and often before we expected, we will see ourselves standing upright and whole, ready to run freely after the odor of the Beloved's fragrance.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Cf Song of Songs 1:4, Douay-Rheims

# An Opening of Hearts

The chief task of the athlete is to enter into his heart<sup>1</sup>

St. Macarius the Great

**F**OR LOVE TO EXIST, HEARTS MUST BE OPENED. Yet prudence dictates that the heart must be guarded, and so we allow entry in stages as a relationship develops. In the biblical tradition, the heart is understood to be the very root of the person; it is not simply an organ. Due to the fallen nature of humanity, allowing unfettered access to the heart would result in disaster. As we work the soil of the soul, we choose which walls and gates to build. If our labors have been deep and transformative, we might build gates and walls that protect the heart and interior life of the soul, but still allow for the passage of charity. If our hearts have been deeply wounded, we might be tempted to guard it with the flaming swords of fear, mistrust, and self-centeredness. The choice is always ours.

Yet we are not the only ones who can open our hearts. Throughout our long years of labor, setbacks, and conversion, God has stood before

<sup>1</sup> Irene Hausherr, SJ, *The Name of Jesus*, translated by C. Cumings (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978), 314.

us with his Heart completely exposed. He has been waiting for us to raise our eyes and peer into his Heart to see his Garden. As Fr. Philippe so beautifully put it, “We know that our new Paradise is the wound in the heart of the Lamb, pierced and thereby opened by the sword which closed the first paradise.”<sup>2</sup>

This opened Heart of God is the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ. After Jesus had died on the cross, one of the soldiers thrust a lance into his heart to ensure that he was dead. When his heart was opened, blood and water poured forth.<sup>3</sup> It was at this moment that the Church was born:

The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus. For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the “wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.” As Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so the Church was born from the pierced heart of Christ hanging dead on the cross.<sup>4</sup>

The opening of Jesus’s heart was not only the birth of the Church, but the establishment of an invitation for all to find cleansing and shelter within his wounds. The Roman soldier who pierced his side is unnamed in the Gospels, but ancient tradition records his name as Longinus. We can imagine Longinus standing on Calvary in the heat of the afternoon, eager to finish the execution detail and go back to camp. It is unknown whether he felt any malice or hatred towards Jesus, or was

<sup>2</sup> Marie-Dominique Philippe, *Wherever He Goes: A Retreat on the Gospel of St. John* (London: T&T Clark, Ltd, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> John 19:34

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 766.

just doing his duty, but it is clear that his intent was to ensure that Jesus was killed.

When Longinus buried the lance into the heart of Jesus, his desire to destroy the life of our Lord met with the desire of Jesus to give him eternal life and make a place for him. The instrument of killing would be frustrated in its goal, and would result in the opening of a torrent of life. It would be the supreme example of how the advent of Christ would rework swords into plowshares.<sup>5</sup>

When we are hurt by another, our natural tendency is to slam shut the gates to our heart and swear to ourselves that we will be more careful in the future. When God is harmed, his response is to show himself completely. He has provided his Heart as a cleft where the dove might take her rest.

Therefore, why should we fear to enter into this most holy of sanctuaries and find shelter? Are we afraid to bring our tarnished heart into his most Sacred Heart? The lance and soul of Longinus, marred with sin, found cleansing through contact with the Sacred Heart. However sinful we are, we make God burn with love for us. He longs for us as the Beloved longs for the bride in the Song of Solomon. Like us, she turns from his desire and protests that she is not beautiful enough for him:

*Do not gaze at me because I am swarthy,  
because the sun has scorched me.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 2:4

<sup>6</sup> Song of Songs 1:6, RSV



His response is one of complete captivation:

*You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride,  
you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes.*<sup>7</sup>

God's response, as seen through the Song of Songs, is that of a groom who cannot help but be enamored by his bride, even when she does not feel beautiful. He is like the husband who, upon waking, exclaims upon his wife's beauty as she protests that her hair is a mess.

God desires our conversion so that we might be with him for all eternity; he wants us to draw near to his heart so that we might find the Love that will convert us. It is through our honest climbing into the cleft of the Heart of God and meditating upon how Love has suffered to wash us clean, that we will be made whole. Speaking of Mary Magdalene, a Carthusian wrote, "Love only asked one thing of her: to climb up Calvary, to stand at the foot of the cross and contemplate the appalling torment of that most sublime object of her love."<sup>8</sup>

If we shelter in His Sacred Heart, we dwell in the very reminder of His passion and death for us. It is a great mystery that, in Heaven, we will see his wounds forever and not be saddened about it. We will gaze upon the glorified wounds of Christ, wounds that were caused by our sins, but this will only stoke the fire of our love. We see that the Sacred Heart is aflame with the fire of the love of God. As we

<sup>7</sup> Song of Songs 4:9

<sup>8</sup> A Monk, *The Hermitage Within*, 32.

enter in, we realize, like Moses gazing upon the burning bush, that this is a fire that burns and yet does not destroy.<sup>9</sup>

There is something deep within us, however, that will flee from this Heart and its purifying fire. Like the Israelites standing before Mount Sinai, this unconverted part of us cries out, “This great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die.”<sup>10</sup> If we cling to this heart of fire, it will indeed burn away the old man of sin. Ignore his cries—what has he ever done for us except bring misery and death? This is the time to lay hold of Christ, and to say with the bride,

*I held him, and I will not let him go.*<sup>11</sup>

As the fire purifies deeper and we take on more aspects of the Beloved, the veil that covered our understanding will begin to fall away. We will beg God to take absolutely everything, to burn everything that is opposed to him, to increase our desire to match his own.

“With her veil now removed, the bride sees with pure eyes the ineffable beauty of her spouse and is wounded by a spiritual, fiery shaft of desire. For love which is aroused is called desire.”<sup>12</sup> Wounded by this desire, we will cry out,

*I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 3:2

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 5:25

<sup>11</sup> Song of Songs 3:4

<sup>12</sup> MacCambley, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 234.

<sup>13</sup> Song of Songs 7:10

Because God can give himself in an unlimited way to every person, his love and desire will seem to be exclusively for us:

*My dove is my only one.*<sup>14</sup>

Driven ever deeper into the Sacred Heart, being wounded and healed by love, we will then see the wisdom in the words of St. Macarius the Great:

Let us make our body an altar of sacrifice.  
Let us place all our desires on it  
and beseech the Lord  
that he would send down from Heaven  
that invisible and mighty fire  
to consume the altar and everything that is on it.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Song of Songs 6:9, Jerusalem Bible

<sup>15</sup> McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters*, 148.

# The Interior Cleft

I am with you always

Matthew 28:20

**T**HINK ABOUT NAZARETH: There the mother of God, the queen of heaven and earth, was only the housewife of a poor family, and her daily horizon stretched no further than the confines of a village. Yet she was more than the temple in Jerusalem. She was the mystic bride of the God who was worshipped there.”<sup>1</sup> She was the living tabernacle of Jesus, God incarnate, and she conversed with him in great intimacy.

If we are in the state of grace, then we have an inner sanctuary that is open to us at all times, regardless of outside circumstances. Within the sanctuary of our soul is the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul reminds us: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”<sup>2</sup> It is a teaching of the Church that the Persons of the Trinity do not act alone; therefore, not only the Holy Spirit dwells within the soul, but the Father and Son are there as well. And not only the Trinity is there; where God is, Heaven follows. As the anonymous Carthusian

<sup>1</sup> A Monk, *The Hermitage Within*, 120.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:16, RSV

author of *The Hermitage Within* wrote, “Do not look for God in place or space. Close the eyes of your body, chain up your imagination, and go down into yourself: you reach the Holy of Holies where the Holy Spirit dwells.”<sup>3</sup>

If we do go down within ourselves and seek the “Holy of Holies where the Holy Spirit dwells,” we will find an immense gift—a cleft that is a safe place for the dove to repose. It is a cleft where she can gaze upon the Beloved and rest in him whenever she desires. Even when we are sleeping or are negligent in giving our attention to the indwelling Trinity, our bridegroom, our gardener, is there in a state of fruitful repose: “At this very moment, which I am wasting on trifles, Almighty God is busy within me, bringing his co-eternal son to birth.”<sup>4</sup> In order to pray and descend within this Heaven of our soul, we must regularly become silent. St. John of the Cross wrote, “The Father spoke one Word, which was his Son, and this Word he speaks always in eternal silence, and in silence it must be heard by the soul.”<sup>5</sup> Regular periods of silence and descending into the soul, even if painfully boring or dry, are essential in order to listen to the movements of God within the cleft. As St. Teresa of Avila wrote, “It is foolish to think that we will enter heaven without entering into ourselves.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A Monk, *The Hermitage Within*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>5</sup> St. John of the Cross, “Sayings of Light and Love,” *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 92.

<sup>6</sup> St. Teresa of Avila, “The Interior Castle,” in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Volume 2 (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2012), 303.

Even though this contemplation of God and experience of his delights will be veiled and seen “through a glass, darkly,”<sup>7</sup> it will transform us and be the entrance into a life of peace and felicity that will ultimately be satisfied in Heaven. Even there, our love and contemplation will be no static thing. We will dive into the depths of God’s essence for eternity. “Joy will be fulfilled,” wrote St. Bernard of Clairvaux, “but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search.”<sup>8</sup> It is humanly impossible to imagine how we will spend all eternity in this contemplation. One possible analogy might be of a child at an amusement park. The child sees a nearly endless view of amusements, but is only able to enjoy them in sequence. His joy is fulfilled by riding a particular roller coaster, but he ardently seeks the next amusement.

Therefore, let us not fear the difficulties involved in silencing our thoughts and reposing our will within the cleft of the soul, allowing it to rest even in dry desolation. Like the bride, we should take our rest from the toil and heat of the demands of life, and recline in shade and coolness:

*As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men. With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.*<sup>9</sup>

Resting in this way, we will experience for ourselves that God will soon come to console us. As the incomparable St. Gregory of Nyssa puts it, “Like a steed she races through all she perceives by sense or by

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12, KJV

<sup>8</sup> St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Sermon 84*.

<sup>9</sup> Song of Songs 2:3, RSV

reason; and she soars like a dove until she comes to rest with longing under the shade of the apple tree.”<sup>10</sup>

As our love of the indwelling Trinity grows stronger, we will recognize that we have become tabernacles that carry God throughout a fallen world, bringing light and hope. This will not be an easy task. The world itself, along with the devil and the disordered tendencies of the flesh, will do all they can to dissuade us from our efforts. Persistence and humility will guide us through these struggles as our love pours itself out onto the feet of Christ, filling other souls with its fragrance. For we are called not only to love Christ and rest in him, but to go out and fight for the salvation of souls. The Song of Solomon gives two images of the bride that are in line with this call to combat:

*I compare you, my love, to a mare of Pharaoh's chariots.*<sup>11</sup>

*Who is this that looks forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army with banners?*<sup>12</sup>

Describing the bride as a warhorse is a far cry from the gentle, soft image of a dove. In Egyptian warfare, the horse-drawn chariots would lead the battle and deliver the first strike. Their goal was to terrorize the enemy's troops and break their lines.<sup>13</sup> This behavior was not natural to the horse, however. Long periods of training were required in order to

<sup>10</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, “Commentary on the Canticle 1001,” in *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, translated by Herbert Musurillo (New York City: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1961), 247-248.

<sup>11</sup> Song of Songs 1:9

<sup>12</sup> Song of Songs 6:10

<sup>13</sup> *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Chariotry in Ancient Egypt,” accessed August 6, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariotry\\_in\\_ancient\\_Egypt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariotry_in_ancient_Egypt).

overcome the horse's natural fear of the chaos of battle. They were also trained to bite and kick, and to be completely obedient to their master.<sup>14</sup> The bride, like the warhorse, is seen as a terror to her foes, smiting them without fear because she knows that her Master is right behind her, guiding her with a skilled hand and joining her in the battle. She will not be dissuaded by the temptation to flee from the struggle, and will not be turned back by the injuries that she sustains.

She is also "terrible as an army with banners." Redeemed and bathed in the blood of the Lamb, she is a force to be reckoned with because she carries the stamp of her Master and is made in his image. Her foes see the creator of all things dwelling within her, and it strikes them with horror. This is the truth of the indwelling, this is the strength that indwells along with the purity and gentleness of the dove.

There is nothing to fear from our enemies if we carry God within and remain faithful to him. If we fall in the battle, we confess our sin and rise up once again. There are times, however, when we might lie dejected and wounded, wondering if God has gone ahead of us. We look at our weaknesses and our failures, our infidelities and our inconstancies. If we cry out for him, will he return with frustration, angry that we have fallen? Feebly, we whisper:

*Draw me after you, let us make haste.*<sup>15</sup>

He speaks:

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., s.v. "Horses in Warfare," accessed August 6, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horses\\_in\\_Warfare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horses_in_Warfare).

<sup>15</sup> Song of Songs 1:4



*Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle; or a young stag upon the mountains of spices.*<sup>16</sup>

Have you ever seen a gazelle run? Or a stag expertly leaping from crag to crag upon the face of a mountain? The Beloved is calling us to him! Let us run, let us fly up the mountain that is burning and smoking because the love of God is there! Do not fear the blare of the trumpets as the Israelites did, for it is the call of the angels as they encourage us forward. Let us no longer wander the side paths, fearful of the climb, but run straight up because God is calling us to make haste and the time is short! Embrace the struggle, do not fear to love and to fight, and go forward with confidence, for Christ has given us all things for all eternity:

Mine are the Heavens and mine is the earth.

Mine are the nations,  
the just are mine,  
and mine the sinners.

The angels are mine, and the Mother of God,  
and all things are mine;  
and God himself is mine and for me,  
because Christ is mine and all for me.<sup>17</sup>

What else do we have to wish for? Why should we delay another moment?

<sup>16</sup> Song of Songs 8:14

<sup>17</sup> St. John of the Cross, "Sayings of Light and Love," *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 87.

# The Magdalene in Art

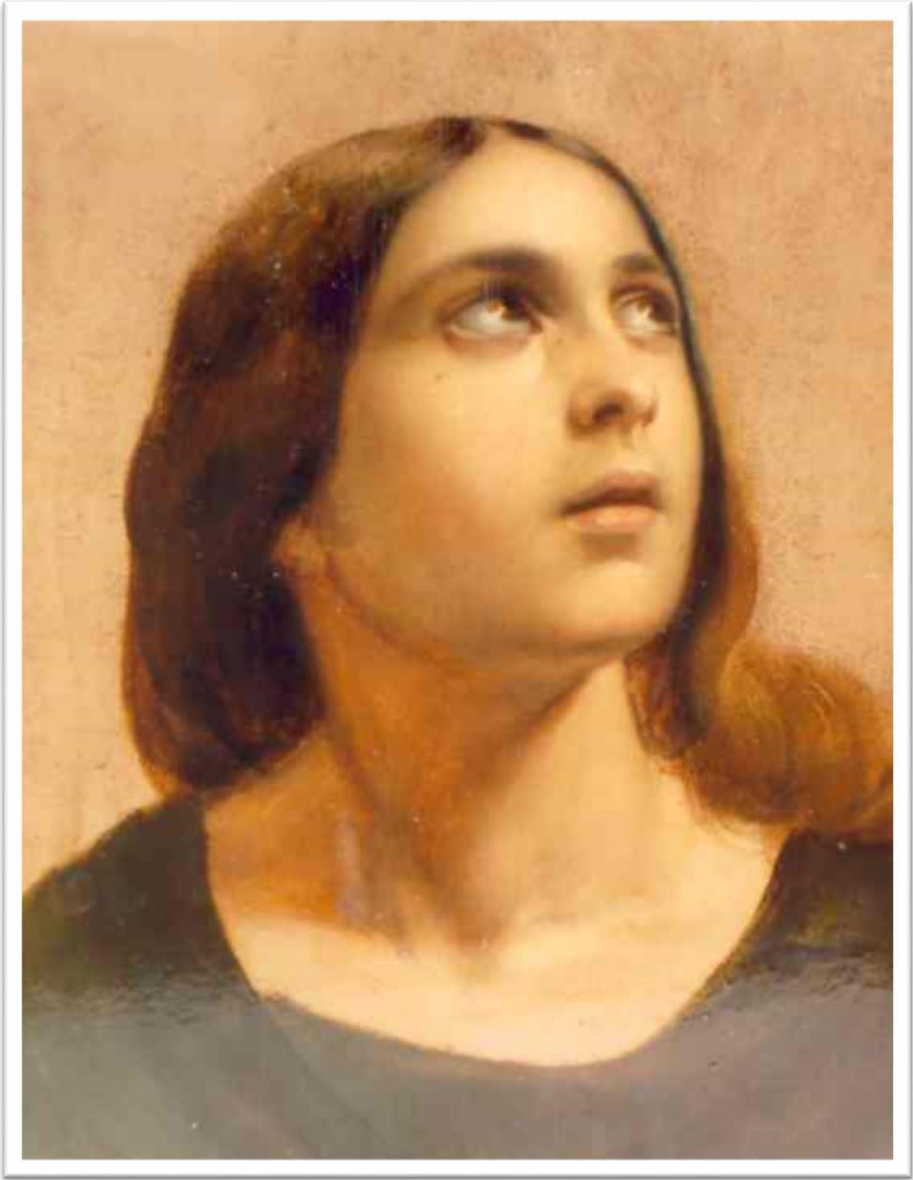
“Behold, you are beautiful!”

Song of Songs 4:1

**I**T WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO WRITE about St. Mary Magdalene and not show works of art that she inspired. I have included some personal commentary; it comes not from the stricter interpretations of art history, but from my own devotional use of each work.

## **A Note on Iconography**

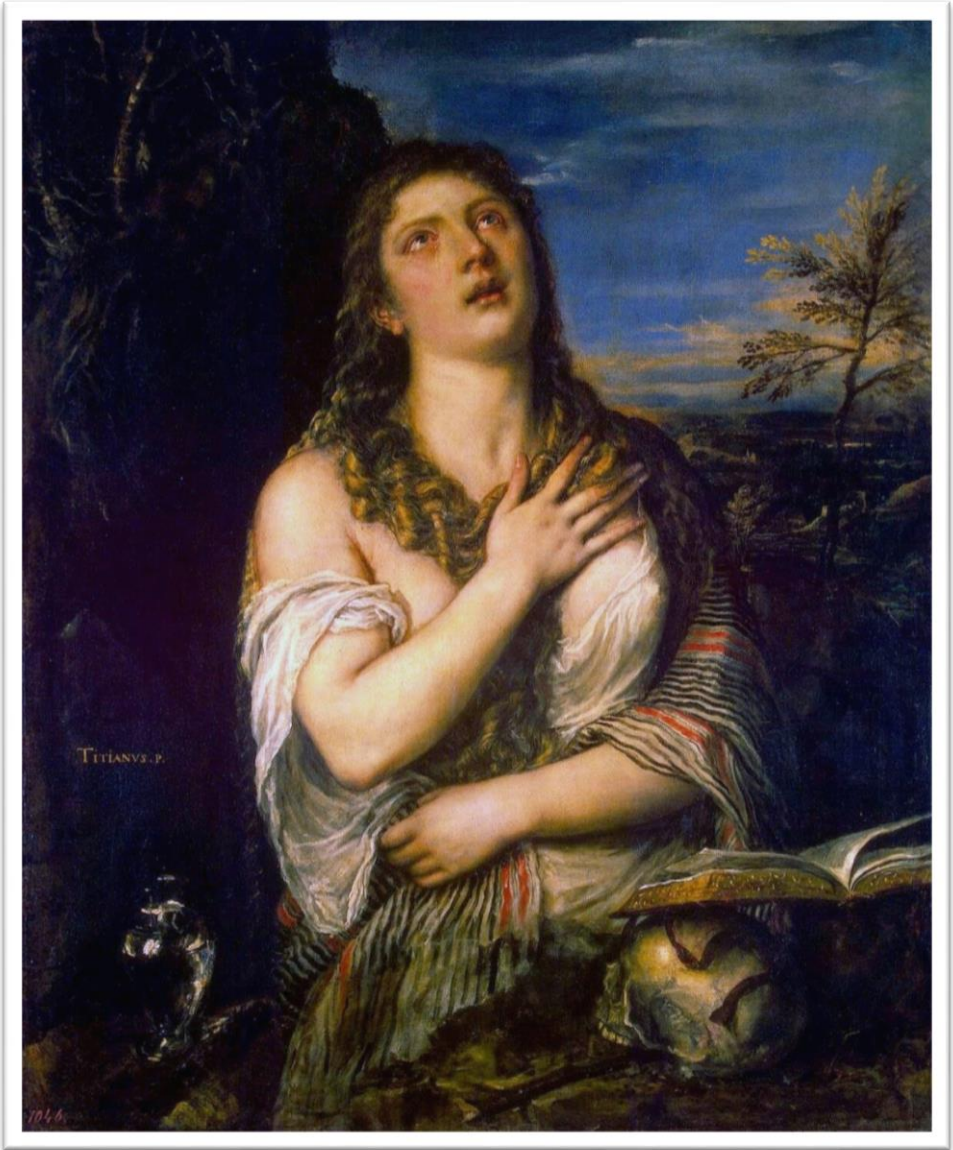
In devotional art, there are usually certain symbols and objects that accompany a saint. These provide reminders of their life, and they also call the viewer to imitation. For example, books and skulls are commonly found in paintings of Mary Magdalene. Skulls were used as objects of reflection on the swiftness of life and the inevitability of death, and books show the continuous pondering of truth. A fruitful devotional exercise is to examine classic works of Christian art and look for the symbolic elements that have a lesson within them.



**Magdalena** by Georgette Tattarescu (19<sup>th</sup> century)  
Bucharest Museum

When viewing this stunning portrait of a young Mary Magdalene, we intuitively know that she is looking at Jesus. The painting's lack of context and narrative frees us in our use of it in meditative prayer. Perhaps she has just finished anointing the feet of Jesus, and is looking up to see his reaction. She might be turning in astonishment and love at hearing Jesus call her name at the tomb, or looking at him with gratitude after being freed of the demonic. There is an almost breathless energy in her eyes and parted lips, and each time I see her I am left with one thought: "How does my love of Jesus compare with that look?"





**Penitent Magdalene** by Titian (16<sup>th</sup> century)  
Hermitage, St. Petersburg

“Probably in her inner wilderness, no day went by without her reliving those climactic hours of human history, which had been her Calvary, too.”<sup>18</sup>

Repentance is the first command that Jesus issued.<sup>19</sup> Saints would often receive the gift of tears as an outward sign of their inward repentance. These purifying tears were treasured because they issued from true compunction that leads to joy. The memory of the sins that caused such destruction and suffering to the self, to others, and to God becomes overwhelmed by gratitude that forgiveness has been found and embraced. Mary Magdalene always remembered the cost of her sins, but she never forgot the flood of mercy that annihilated them.



<sup>18</sup> A Monk, *The Hermitage Within*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 4:17



**Magdalene with the Smoking Flame** by Georges de la Tour (17<sup>th</sup> century)  
National Gallery, London

This painting is similar to the Penitent Magdalene by Titian, but has an atmosphere of calm. Mary Magdalene is gazing at the flame, her hand caressing the skull on her lap. Her other hand rests on her face, as if she is calling to mind just how fleeting life and beauty are. We also see a flagellum (stained with blood in the actual painting) resting on the cross, a reminder of her life of penitence.

Though healed by Christ and forgiven, Mary Magdalene knows that the battle is not over. She is wearing a rope cincture around her waist. This symbolizes not only the celibate's restraint of the reproductive organs, but the securing of robe in preparation for battle. Her beauty is on full display here, but not in a licentious manner. She is alone and unashamed before God, but is braced for the struggles ahead, struggles that will only end when death and judgment come.







**Mary Magdalene and Angels** by unknown artist (14<sup>th</sup> century)  
St. John's Church, Toruń, Poland

According to local legend, angels would carry Mary Magdalene to the top of her mountain retreat and feed her with the Blessed Sacrament. In this work, we see her surrounded by an angelic host, and her face is radiant. Her hair has completely covered her as a garment. There is a beautiful theological truth that “grace perfects nature.” Perhaps the unknown artist is showing this truth in an exterior way. Her hair, once a contributor to vanity and lust, has wiped the feet of God and been elevated in its beauty and abundance.

When God perfects us, nothing good is destroyed, and even our failings can have good drawn out of them. Some have written of how their tendency to anger was changed to zeal, for example. It is sin which makes everything ugly and shameful—these are words that have no place in this remarkable work of art.





Matthew Manint resides in Biloxi, Mississippi. He is a consecrated man who follows the spirituality of Blessed Charles de Foucauld. Bl. Charles's inspirations were the hidden life of Jesus at Nazareth and being a brother to all.