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What was the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene?

23 Questions & answers about Jesus Christ, prepared by a team of catholic theologians of the University of Navarre. This is question 17: "What was the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene?"

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● It is clear from the Gospels that Mary Magdalene had a great love for

Jesus. She had been freed by him from possession by seven devils, had followed him as a disciple, ministering to him from her means (Luke 8:2-3), and had been with Mary, the Mother of Jesus and the other women when Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:40-41). She was, according to the Gospels, the first person to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection, after searching for him tearfully (John 20:11-18). Hence the veneration which the Church has had for her as a witness to the risen Christ. (See: “Who was Mary Magdalene?”). From these Gospel passages one cannot conclude that she was a sinner, and much less that she was the wife of Jesus.

● Those who claim that she was the wife of Jesus rely on some apocryphal gospels. All of them, with the possible exception of part of the Gospel of Thomas, were written after the canonical Gospels and are not

historical in character, but were written to transmit Gnostic teachings. According to these works, which are not properly speaking Gospels but rather writings that contain what are said to be secret revelations of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection, Mariam (or Marianne or Mariham – the name Magdalene does not appear except in a few books) was the one who best understood those revelations. That is why she is Jesus' favourite disciple and receives from him a special revelation.

► The opposition which she faces from the apostles because she is a woman (according to some of these writings: The Gospel of Thomas, Dialogues of the Saviour, Pistis Sophia, The Gospel of Mary) reflects the negative attitude of some of the gnostics to the feminine and to Mary as an important disciple. Nevertheless, some people like to see

this opposition as a reflection of the attitude of the official Church at the time, against the spiritual leadership of women as proposed by those groups. None of this is demonstrable.

► This opposition is more likely to have been a conflict of doctrines: Peter and the other apostles confronting the ideas that these gnostic groups were putting forward in the name of Mariam. In any case, having recourse to Mary was a way of justifying their gnostic ideas.

► In other apocryphal gospels, especially the Gospel of Philip, Marian (this time she is also cited with her name of origin, Magalene) is a model of gnosticism, precisely because of her femininity. She is the spiritual symbol of discipleship of Christ and of perfect union with him. In this context they speak of a kiss between Jesus and Mary (if the text is really to be understood in that way),

symbolising that union, since through that kiss, which was a kind of sacrament superior to baptism and to the eucharist, the gnostic engendered himself as a gnostic. The whole tone of these writings is quite foreign to any kind of sexual implications.

► If, according to the gospel of Judas, Jesus himself orders the apostle to betray him, it is because, by dying, the divine spirit which was in him would finally be able to liberate itself from involvement of the flesh and re-ascend to heaven. Marriage oriented to births is to be avoided; woman will be saved only if the "feminine principle" (thelus) personified by her, is transformed into the masculine principle, that is, if she ceases to be woman.

● No serious scholar takes these Gnostic texts as historical evidence of a sexual relationship between Jesus

and Mary Magdalene. It is very sad that that accusation, which has no historical foundation – not even the Christians of that time found themselves having to defend themselves against it – should resurface every now and again as though it were a great novelty.

► The huge misunderstanding is the fact that these writings are used to make them say exactly the opposite of what they intended. The Gnostic vision – a mixture of Platonic dualism and Eastern doctrines, cloaked in biblical ideas – holds that the material world is an illusion, the work of the God of the Old Testament, who is an evil god, or at least inferior; Christ did not die on the cross, because he never assumed, except in appearance, a human body, the latter being unworthy of God (Docetism). The strange thing is that today there are those who believe they see in these writings the

exaltation of the feminine principle,
of sexuality, of the full and
uninhibited enjoyment of this
material world!

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