

BELITTLED YET BELOVED:  
THE INFLUENCE OF MARY MAGDALENE'S STORY IN CATHOLIC LGBTQ  
IDENTITY

Thesis

Submitted to

The College of Arts and Sciences of the  
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of

Masters of Arts in Theological Studies

By

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December, 2022

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## ABSTRACT

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### THE INFLUENCE OF MARY MAGDALENE'S STORY IN CATHOLIC LGBTQ IDENTITY

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This thesis argues that Mary Magdalene is a perfect unofficial patron saint for the Catholic LGBTQ community due to similarities in experienced and assumed identity. People who actively identify as both Catholic and LGBTQ experience a tension between these two identities, particularly in light of such Church teachings as the USCCB document *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*. Neither identity can easily be set aside in favor of the other without causing harm to the person's mental and spiritual health, and so the person's sense of self is torn between these two innate and unchosen identities. Mary Magdalene's identity, on the other hand, was split by her devotional cults after her death into the blessed and beloved apostle to the apostles, and repentant sexual sinner. Given that the LGBTQ Catholic experiences a dual identity between beloved child of God as a Catholic, and an imposed identity of assumed sexual sin as a queer person, the natural conclusion is for the LGBTQ Catholic to find a devotion

to Mary Magdalene and seek her intercession on their behalf as they navigate their identity, affirming both love of God and love of self.

Dedicated to all LGBTQ+ Catholics who do not feel they have a spiritual home. I see you, and I love you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest thanks go to Dr. Jana Bennett for her immeasurable patience and support during this extended thesis process. Her knowledge and guidance helped this thesis grow from a confused passion project into the nuanced and carefully considered argument contained herein.

I also wish to thank my beloved partner in crime, Chelsea, who initially sparked my devotion to Mary Magdalene as a patron saint of the queer community, and who has listened to countless hours of my rambling, frustration and joy alike. My fellow Campus Ministry GA and dear friend Corinne Woodruff has been an invaluable support throughout our two years in the Masters program together.

Finally, I would like to express my love and appreciation to my darling family. My parents, Clayton and Kristin Hynfield, have been a wellspring of support and encouragement my entire life, and I would not be who and where I am today without their love. My eight younger siblings have been a source of joy and comfort as I have wrestled with the difficult nature of my subject matter. Thank you all for your support and love throughout my intellectual pursuits. To quote Frodo Baggins, “I am glad you are here with me, here at the end of all things.”

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The teaching of the Catholic Church on homosexuality has been the subject of many studies, debates, heartbreaks, and personal revelations throughout the years. As with most Church teachings, the manner in which it is discussed and the point of view most likely to be encountered depends greatly on whether one is in a more conservative or a more progressive setting. However, few of the studies and debates explore the actual lived experiences of the people who identify as both practicing Catholic and as queer.<sup>1</sup> As an active and practicing Catholic who also happens to be a queer person, I have long felt in these discussions the absence of one particular aspect of Catholic LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> life that is quite uncomfortable, and thus frequently left aside. That aspect is the painfully tense split in identity felt by many LGBTQ Catholics as they strive to balance their queer identity with their baptismal identity. Each side seems to invite the LGBTQ Catholic to renounce the other identity for the sake of easing the tension and living in peace; yet, while some people are able to “reconcile” these identities by renouncing one or the other, many LGBTQ Catholics find themselves perpetually torn and unable to silence one half in favor of the other.

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<sup>1</sup>At the time of writing this thesis, the reclaimed term “queer” is the most commonly accepted umbrella term referring to all identities within the LGBTQ+ community, and will thus be used throughout the thesis.

<sup>2</sup>Over the course of this thesis, I will be using the term “LGBTQ+” to refer to the whole of the queer community, whereas “LGBQ” will refer to the subset of people who experience same-sex attraction in some way. Since this thesis will address the conflation of sexuality with sin, the latter group will be the main focus of the discussion. While gender identity is an important part of the discussion around both the pastoral response of the Church and Mary Magdalene’s story, it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

In my thesis, I intend to contribute to the ongoing conversation surrounding Catholic queer theology and its everyday practical applications by addressing this tension of identity as a wound and a problem within the Mystical Body of Christ, and bring to light the often-overlooked experience of an LGBTQ person who is also striving to live an authentically Catholic life. While I recognize that this problem is complex and would require years of dialogue and mutual effort to solve, I further intend to outline a potential way forward in healing for those who experience such a tension. Mary Magdalene, a beloved saint in the Catholic Church, is a deeply misunderstood and misrepresented figure within Scriptural history. Known in popular culture through such works as *The Da Vinci Code* and *Godspell*, her image in the public sphere is entirely wrapped up in an identity of sexual sin. Yet, Mary Magdalene was never a prostitute, as she is commonly known; rather, she was an especially honored and beloved disciple of Christ, independently wealthy and revered for her wisdom. It is this tension between an identity as a beloved disciple and an externally imposed identity of sexual sin that leads me to propose that Mary Magdalene is a perfect candidate for an unofficial patron saint of the Catholic LGBTQ community.

The body of this thesis proceeds through three chapters, each divided into sections. Chapter II addresses the concept of a dual or bifurcated identity in the Catholic LGBTQ experience, explaining its causes and effects, and the complicating factors introduced by the desire to live out both identities in an authentic and affirming way. This chapter also seeks to engage the teachings of the Church which lead to a sense of torn identity, and engage the testimonies of queer Catholics who have wrestled with these

teachings. In Chapter III, I pivot to addressing the person of Mary Magdalene, and her characterization in Scripture, early Church devotion, and the devotional cults of the Late Middle Ages, in which her role as *beata peccatrix* became popularized. Finally, Chapter IV seeks to establish Mary Magdalene as an unofficial patron saint of the community by bringing Mary Magdalene's identity of "blessed sinner" into conversation with the painful experience of being a Catholic who is defined by others as a sexual sinner, and stigmatized by an uncommitted sin. I further argue for her patronage by exploring the ways in which the connection to Mary Magdalene's dual identity opens a path for LGBTQ Catholics who feel torn about their identities to find a way forward in the light of the love of God. The chapter concludes by presenting a message of comfort, hope, and inspiration which LGBTQ Catholics can find in the story of Mary Magdalene, and asserting that this is what makes her a perfect fit as an unofficial patron saint of the community.

## CHAPTER II

### QUEER AND CATHOLIC: THE TENSION OF DUAL IDENTITY

#### **The Relationship between Doctrine and Identity**

Having introduced the dual identity experienced by many LGBQ Catholics, the next stage of this study will be to explore where this tension comes from, why it is harmful, and how it can be addressed pastorally. Said tension arises when an individual has two identities, each whole in itself and a core part of the individual's understanding of themselves, yet they seem to pull on that understanding of self in opposition to one another in such a way as to never allow the person to feel fully whole. In the case of LGBQ people, current language surrounding the Catholic doctrine seems to conflict with their understanding of who they are as people, as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or any other sexual orientation tends to be an intrinsic part of how they understand themselves as human beings. Sadly, this can lead to inner turmoil when they also view Catholicism as intrinsic to their identity, since adhering to what the Catholic Church teaches is an important part of what it means to be Catholic. Despite pastoral theology set forth by the Catholic Church, many LGBQ Catholics experience a sense of bifurcated identity due to said theology and the understanding of self which arises from it, which harms the very people this theology is meant to uplift and support.

#### **Common Misconceptions in Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality**

A major factor in this sense of split identity is the promulgation of past Church teaching as though it were current, not by the Church as a whole, but by individuals and

parishes, particularly in more conservative Catholic communities. While few believe that the Church still adheres to antiquated beliefs such as that which states that all gay people are going to Hell simply due to their same-sex attraction, there are still a number of misunderstandings surrounding more modern Church teaching as a result of problems in reception and interpretation. For example, many believe that the official stance of the Catholic Church is reflected in the 1986 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). While the document notes a difference between the “homosexual condition” and “individual homosexual actions,” it classifies both as disordered.<sup>1</sup> It denounces actions as “intrinsically disordered,” and strongly exhorts bishops to give special and careful pastoral attention towards LGBTQ people, “lest they be led to believe that the living out of this orientation in homosexual activity is a morally acceptable option.”<sup>2</sup> Because the actions are “an intrinsic moral evil,” the CDF concludes that homosexual orientations must themselves “be seen as an objective disorder.”<sup>3</sup> This is a very strongly worded approach, firm in its opposition to homosexual action and orientation alike, and operating under an automatic suspicion of the willpower and intentions of LGBTQ people. The CDF carefully notes that homosexual inclination is not sinful, and there is a strong emphasis on the human dignity of all persons regardless of sexual orientation, along with a condemnation of violence and hateful speech or action

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<sup>1</sup>Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, Vatican City: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986, §2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., §2-3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., §3.

against LGBQ persons.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the wording of the document holds little compassion for the struggle of LGBQ people, instead taking a hard stance on proper catechesis and an exhortation to turn to God lest they believe acting upon their desires is ever acceptable on a moral level, let alone good. The words “intrinsically disordered” are frequently highlighted as the most important part of this document, painting a very clear picture of the Church’s view of homosexual actions. While the Church certainly does not condone gay sex or marriage, neither does it currently stand in such aggressive opposition to and suspicion of LGBQ people, especially those who are themselves Catholic.

Another common yet outdated practice comes from the belief that the Church still approaches pastoral care in the language outlined in the 1997 document *Always Our Children*. While there is a great deal more compassion in this document than in its 1986 predecessor, it is still somewhat demeaning towards the actual LGBQ people about whom it is speaking. The letter is a pastoral message towards parents, caretakers, and ministers of LGBQ children with guidelines for caring for the children and helping them navigate being Catholic, while still acknowledging their LGBQ tendency. In itself, this is a worthy goal, and an important part of creating a healthy environment in the Church for LGBQ children to grow up in faith and affirmation of their whole selves. However, since it was written during a time filled with conversion therapy and parents rejecting gay children by throwing them out onto the streets, the message is quite problem-oriented: that is, it presents a child coming out as LGBQ as a problem, and guides said authority figures on how to approach this problem in a well-informed and pastoral way. The letter opens with

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<sup>4</sup>CDF, *Letter to the Bishops*, §10.

words of reassurance and calm, not to the scared children, but to their caregivers: “The purpose of this pastoral message is to reach out to parents trying to cope with the discovery of homosexuality in their adolescent or adult child. It urges families to draw upon the reservoirs of faith, hope, and love as they face uncharted futures.”<sup>5</sup> Parents and other caregivers are referred to as coping with challenge, needing to seek out help for their child, and facing feelings of turmoil, mourning, fear, pain, or betrayal.<sup>6</sup> The letter gives the impression that a child coming out as queer is something disruptive and negative, a problem to be faced and overcome so that the caregivers can once again treat the child with compassion. For the time in which the letter was written, this was a necessary and relatively appropriate pastoral letter, addressing a real need for compassion where little was to be found. Unfortunately, some believe that this is still the overriding tone of the Catholic approach to LGBTQ people, seeing them as a problem disrupting normal life and requiring a great deal of prayer and work to overcome in order to simply treat them as human beings loved by God.

Finally, it is not uncommon for homosexuality to be compared to or even equated with alcoholism when addressing it as a tendency in light of Catholic teaching. For example, the Ramsey Colloquium, an ecumenical condemnation of homosexuality spearheaded by Catholic priest Richard John Neuhaus, compared homosexuality to alcoholism in a 1994 statement which noted that suggestion of a genetic predisposition towards homosexuality is “not significantly different from evidence of predispositions

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<sup>5</sup>NCCB Committee on Marriage and Family, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*, Washington, D.C.: Office of Publication Services, U.S. Catholic Conference, 1997, 1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 3-5.



toward other traits—for example, alcoholism or violence.”<sup>7</sup> They are both unchangeable and unchosen conditions to which some have a predisposition, and those who indulge this predisposition find themselves in grave moral danger. After this initial comparison, however, the analogy immediately fails “inasmuch as the act itself, drinking alcohol, is not considered a problem for non-alcoholics...If the analogy were to hold, the only persons that ought not engage in homosexual acts are persons with a homosexual orientation. Heterosexuals would be free to do so—not a satisfactory solution for either side of the debate.”<sup>8</sup> This is obviously not the implication of Church teaching. Andrew Sullivan, who has written a great deal about Catholic queer theology, goes on to point out a far deeper problem with the analogy, one which leads to a troubling image of self when internalized by a confused LGBTQ teen. When an alcoholic renounces alcohol and is in recovery, they are finally able to realize their full potential in relationship to God, self, and others, up to and including marriage.<sup>9</sup> When an LGBTQ person renounces homosexuality, on the other hand, they are “liberated into sacrifice and pain, barred from the matrimonial love that the Church holds to be intrinsic, for most people, to the state of human flourishing.”<sup>10</sup> “Giving up” queer love is giving up their ability to be fully relational, and in a sense giving up a part of themselves, which renders them unable to truly connect to themselves, God, and others. “In other words, the [LGBTQ] person is

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<sup>7</sup>Richard John Neuhaus, et. al., “The Homosexual Movement: A Response by the Ramsey Colloquium,” *First Things* 41 (March 1994), 18.

<sup>8</sup>David McCarthy Matzko, “Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage,” *Modern Theology* 13, no. 3 (July 1997), 392.

<sup>9</sup>Andrew Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002, 284.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

deemed disordered at a far deeper level than the alcoholic... Their renunciation of such love also is not guided toward some ulterior or greater goal... Rather, the loveless homosexual destiny is precisely toward nothing, a negation of human fulfillment..."<sup>11</sup> This portrays a depressing self-image for the questioning queer Catholic, who is faced with an understanding of doctrine as condemning them to a lifetime of painful solitude, unable to find true fulfillment in love with another human being, purely for the sake of being morally acceptable. While they are doubtless still able to find friendship, they will forever be locked out of the joy and intimate companionship they witness in married couples - a cold, lonely future.

### **Contemporary Catholic Teaching**

The misguided practices based in outdated Church teaching that I have named have harmful implications for one's self-perception if they are internalized and form the basis of understanding oneself. Thankfully, they are simply that: misguided, and outdated. Current official Catholic teaching about and for LGBTQ people is not rooted in suspicion and bad faith, nor is it patronizingly problem-oriented. Rather, contemporary Catholic teaching on the LGBTQ+ community, queer lifestyles, and ministry to people who experience same-sex attraction tries to be compassionate and sensitive towards the human beings it addresses, while being firmly rooted in an understanding of the whole person and their dignity.

The most up to date official Church document on homosexuality in America provides a much more understanding, if still firm, stance on homosexuality. Released in

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<sup>11</sup>Sullivan, "Alone Again, Naturally," 285.

2006, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* was another document addressed to people finding themselves ministering to LGBTQ people, but it approached ministry in a much more uplifting and affirming way than that of its 1997 predecessor. The very first section after the introduction reaffirms and emphasizes the centrality of human dignity to the discussion of LGBTQ people, and insists that they “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity” while strongly condemning any hatred and violence towards them.<sup>12</sup> This is a far better approach in contemporary culture, since it focuses on the people in need of and receiving ministry, rather than aiming at parents and other caregivers and indicating that they have been emotionally burdened by their child coming out, as it shifts the focus from the identity to the person who holds it. Beginning the document with a compassionate affirmation and inclusion of LGBTQ people sends an important message to all members of the Body: that first and foremost, LGBTQ people should be approached as people.

From there, the document moves on to address sexuality as a whole, noting its place in God’s plan and outlining the reasoning behind Church teaching on sexual morality, and explaining how homosexual actions are not permissible according to that logic. Complementarity of man and woman and openness to the possibility of procreation are considered by the Church to be the “natural ends” of human sexuality, and homosexual acts do not fulfill either of these ends.<sup>13</sup> “Homosexual acts also violate the true purpose of sexuality...Consequently, the Catholic Church has consistently taught

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<sup>12</sup>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care*, Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006, 2.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 3-4.

that homosexual acts ‘are contrary to the natural law. . . Under no circumstances can they be approved.’”<sup>14</sup> In violating a core part of how human beings relate to one another, such actions can easily be seen as violating the internal image of God born by all people. The USCCB thus further claims that “homosexual acts are not in keeping with our being created in God’s image and so degrade and undermine our authentic dignity as human beings.”<sup>15</sup> While this is quite an aggressive condemnation because it defines homosexual acts as inhuman and destructive to the self, the document also stresses that LGBTQ orientations are not in themselves sinful. The USCCB echo the words of the CDF from three decades prior, calling homosexual acts “objectively disordered.”<sup>16</sup>

Like the 1986 document, the latter document distinguishes between the sinful acts, and an internal tendency or predisposition. Simply having that tendency, or experiencing homosexual attraction, is not in itself sinful as long as it is not voluntarily entertained and pursued.<sup>17</sup> However, there is a key difference between the approach of the CDF from 1986, and the approach of the USCCB in 2006. The USCCB takes care to emphasize that it is “crucially important to understand that saying a person has a particular inclination that is disordered is not to say that the person as a whole is disordered.”<sup>18</sup> This is key, as it protects the LGBTQ person in a new way from being dismissed as disordered. While the 1986 document certainly affirmed human dignity,

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<sup>14</sup>USCCB, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*, 4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 6.

LGBQ orientations were presented almost as a threat to that dignity, something actively working against it, whereas the 2006 document is careful to confirm that the orientation or inclination is not a barrier to dignity. Rather, it is presented as just another temptation in an onslaught of enticements to sin that each and every member of the human race experiences, making anyone who experiences it just another human being trying to find their way through a fallen world. This roots the pastoral approach in solidarity and building up one another in virtue, rather than condemnation and chastisement. Thus, the 2006 document still severely condemns homosexual action, but it provides a very clear and straightforward teaching on the dignity of LGBQ persons, approaching their orientation not as a problem to be solved, but as a part of a person with human dignity and human temptation.

With the human dignity of LGBQ persons thus established, the document moves on to address pastoral care and compassionate ministry. The first and most important approach addressed is fostering authentic friendships, as these are “necessary for a full human life,” and are the best way to support another person in forming themselves in virtue.<sup>19</sup> The document especially highlights the need for loving and supportive friendships with family members and a healthy parish community, so as to create a sense of community and connectedness founded in holiness and God’s love.<sup>20</sup> These affirming relationships are the best way for someone who has a tendency towards any sin to strengthen themselves in virtue and grow closer to God. The document provides specific

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<sup>19</sup>USCCB, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*, 10-11.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 11-12.

guidelines for ministry to LGBTQ persons, all aimed towards providing pastoral care to people with human dignity whose dignity has not always been respected and upheld. “A welcoming stance of Christian love by the leadership and the community as a whole is essential for this important work. This is particularly important because more than a few persons with a homosexual inclination feel themselves to be unwelcome and rejected.”<sup>21</sup> This, far more than the condemnation of homosexual acts, is the foundation of contemporary Catholic queer theology: LGBTQ people are human beings with human dignity, seeking to live moral lives, and other Catholics should lovingly support them on their journey while being sensitive to the grave harm that has been and continues to be done to them.

### **Queer Catholic Reception of Aforementioned Theology**

While contemporary Catholic queer theology may be well intentioned and rooted in human dignity, it has not always been received by the people to whom it especially pertains as such. Many LGBTQ Catholics find the explanations of why homosexual acts are not permissible to be excessively harsh, and that harshness bleeds into a suspicion or even disparagement of same-sex attraction as an orientation. While current teaching does emphasize human dignity quite well, it leaves an uncomfortable space for attacking and denouncing a person should they act on their desires and thus, in the words of the 2006 document, undermine and reject their own human dignity.<sup>22</sup> Many LGBTQ Catholics also feel as though the theology is more or less an exhortation to renounce that part of their

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<sup>21</sup>USCCB, *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination*, 17.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 4.

identity which predisposes them towards acts deemed sinful by the Church, so as to be better, more virtuous, and more acceptable to the rest of the Body. Unfortunately, Catholic queer theology is not always received positively by the Catholic LGBTQ community, and in many cases has done more harm than good, leading to warped self-image, feelings of alienation and isolation, and a sense that one needs to cut out a part of themselves in order to be accepted and feel at home and at peace.

Andrew Sullivan provides perhaps the clearest and best articulated testimony representing queer Catholic reception of this theology. In an article discussing various Vatican statements on homosexuality, Sullivan describes his own challenges in balancing being Catholic with being gay, and the ways each impact his identity as a person. He points out that faith and sexual orientation are both intrinsic, and yet one must continuously choose whether or not to affirm each throughout life. “Like faith, one’s sexuality is not simply a choice; it informs a whole way of being. But like faith, it involves choices - the choice to affirm or deny a central part of one’s being, the choice to live a life that does not deny but confronts reality.”<sup>23</sup> Both are a core part of the LGBTQ Catholic’s life, and a crucial factor in how they see and approach the world and God, informing all of their experiences with the physical and the divine. When one is denied in favor of the other, it leads to emotional emptiness and spiritual dullness, so much so that the act could be described as a form of self-mutilation.<sup>24</sup> Sullivan paints a heartbreaking picture of himself as a teenager trying to reconcile his sexual orientation with what his

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<sup>23</sup>Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” 277.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 279.

Church taught him, noting that the problem was not trying to conform his actions to Church teaching, but rather his identity itself: “It entailed trying to understand how my adolescent crushes and passions, my longings for human contact, my stumbling attempts to relate love to life, could be so inimical to the Gospel of Christ and His Church, how they could be so unmentionable among people I loved and trusted.”<sup>25</sup> Since they are both intrinsic and unchosen components of identity, affirmed by choice throughout life, faith and sexuality demand careful balance and mutual affirmation in order to allow a person to feel whole, and holistically engage with their world and their God. Without mutual affirmation, the person’s identity will fall into tumultuous opposition and despair as these two intrinsic aspects pull against each other, creating a crushing tension in the core of oneself.

Later in the article, Sullivan goes on to address the specific implications of Church teaching, and the effects it has on someone whose identity is both Catholic and queer. He implies that the CDF’s approach advocated for homosexual persons by separating “homosexual” and “person,” and placing them practically in opposition.<sup>26</sup> “Person” refers to the individual human being, made in the image and likeness of God, wholly equal in dignity to every other human being regardless of their tendencies. “Homosexual,” then, refers to the objective disordered tendency towards intrinsic evil, becoming an identity of sexual sin and defining any who follow that tendency as a sinner. The CDF, and later the USCCB in 2006, drew LGBTQ Catholics closer into the Church

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<sup>25</sup>Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” 278.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 280.



and strongly advocated for their dignity as persons, yet at the same time more fiercely and harshly condemned the end results of an intrinsic part of who they are. “Ratzinger had guided the Church into two simultaneous and opposite directions: a deeper respect for homosexuals, and a sterner rejection of almost anything they might do...Ratzinger’s letter was asking us, it seems, to love the sinner more deeply than ever before, but to hate the sin even more passionately.”<sup>27</sup> Sullivan goes on to poignantly express his own struggle with this twofold approach to Catholic queer theology.

The distinction made some kind of sense in theory; but in practice, the command to love oneself as a person of human dignity yet hate the core longings that could make one emotionally whole demanded a sense of detachment or a sense of cynicism that seemed inimical to the Christian life. To deny lust was one thing; to deny love was another. And to deny love in the context of *Christian* doctrine seemed particularly perverse.<sup>28</sup>

Sullivan’s words here are crucial, as they give voice to the internal turmoil experienced by countless LGBQ Catholics who are trying to navigate living a life according to Catholic teaching while still affirming themselves as worthy of love and whole, fulfilled lives. Contemporary Catholic queer theology creates an implicit split between the person with dignity and their tendency towards sin and evil, and this split is deeply felt by most members of the Catholic LGBQ community.

Of course, not all LGBQ Catholics experience a lasting tension of identity between their Catholicism and their queerness. Eve Tushnet, another prominent Catholic LGBQ writer, discusses her own experience on the matter in her book *Gay and Catholic*.

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<sup>27</sup>Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” 281-82. Because Cardinal Ratzinger was the prefect of the CDF during the writing of this document, Sullivan refers to the cardinal as the author.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 283.

“When I first entered the Catholic Church I thought of my role—a lesbian-gay-bisexual-queer-same-sex-attracted Christian—as having two parts: the negative act of not having gay sex and the positive act of intellectually understanding the Church’s teachings.”<sup>29</sup>

Tushnet’s experience was a common one: reject the desire so as to not sin, and focus on being a good Catholic. For many, this leads to a subconscious belief that while there is good in identifying as LGBTQ, identifying as Catholic and acting as such is better. Yet, Tushnet was able to find a much more positive and affirming meaning in her approach to balancing her identity. She lives as a celibate gay Catholic in service of her vocation, which she defines as “the path or way of life in which God is calling us to pour out our love for him and for other particular human beings.” A crucial turning point in her approach to her identity and thus her relationship with God was understanding what vocation as a call to love truly meant for someone who was inclined to love in ways seemingly outside of Church teaching. “Vocation is always a positive act of love, not a refraining-from-action. So celibacy, in and of itself, isn’t a vocation in this sense... Singleness is especially not a vocation in this sense, since singleness is defined by lack of connection to others.”<sup>30</sup> With this new definition in mind, Tushnet was able to examine her love for women, see what fruit came from it, and discern how God was calling her to apply this love in new ways. “More or less by instinct, by feel, I had begun to discern what I got from loving women and how I could get some of those things without sinning against chastity. Through my friendships and my work at a crisis pregnancy center, I

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<sup>29</sup>Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith*, (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2014), 4.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

started to consider how and whom God was calling me to love.”<sup>31</sup> Tushnet fulfills her vocation, living a happy and whole life as a gay Catholic, by channeling her desire to connect in love into loving the women and people she serves at the crisis pregnancy center, and being the means by which God touches their lives and brings healing and solidarity.

Tushnet’s experience also speaks directly to the misguided practice of comparing homosexuality to alcoholism, since she herself has dealt with both throughout her life. She does briefly compare the difficulty of remaining sober to the difficulty of remaining celibate, mentioning that both require accountability.<sup>32</sup> But she attributes her difficulties in her relationship with God far more to alcoholism than her queerness. In her introduction, she notes, “Chastity and sexual orientation issues haven’t been my most difficult ongoing struggles as a Catholic. I’d say alcoholism has probably been the toughest one.”<sup>33</sup> Alcohol, for her, came between her and God, temporarily filling her desire for “*ekstasis*, for astonishing contact with something beyond and much greater than the self.”<sup>34</sup> Queer love, however intoxicating it may be, is merely contact with another human being, and while it may obscure one’s relationship with God like any lust can, it is not so all-encompassing as a substance addiction where the substance has taken the place of God. However, she does bring out one significant point in comparing the two which may actually be positive and healing to some LGBTQ Catholics. She discusses her

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<sup>31</sup>Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic*, 49.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 58, 153.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 57.

sobriety as a part of her vocation as well, meaning it cannot be the mere act of abstinence, but must involve turning outward from oneself and connecting to others. “Not having gay sex and not drinking are things I can do on my own, at least for a while. Living out my vocation is something I can only do with the people I’m called to love.”<sup>35</sup> This is perhaps the only way in which alcoholism may be constructively compared to homosexuality: in its subsequent mandate to not collapse inwards on oneself in shame, but to look to other people for support, love, and community in order to live a happy and fulfilled life.

However, even in Tushnet’s ability to find balance, there are shortcomings. She acknowledges that there is loneliness and suffering in this way of life, though of course that suffering is an opportunity to orient oneself toward God and unite oneself with Christ’s suffering.<sup>36</sup> There is distinct and laudable merit in this effort, and indeed it is the truly Catholic thing to do. Yet, somehow, it does not quite speak to the suffering caused by feeling as though your spiritual home is not a home for you, but rather a source of condemnation and shame. Moreover, whether intentional or not, there is an undertone to the book that quietly confirms the deep-seated fear of many LGBTQ Catholics that their queer identity is somehow less worthy than their Catholic identity. She speaks of finding goodness and solidarity in the LGBTQ+ community, “even though we believe we have found something much greater in Christ.”<sup>37</sup> While this seems straightforward and easy to accept, it has a deeper implication. Though it is doubtful that this was her true intention, by separating the two, Tushnet is echoing a widespread implication that Christ and His

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<sup>35</sup>Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic*, 59.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 3

goodness are not found in the LGBTQ+ community, and by extent, that those who choose to be an active part of the community have rejected Christ, at least in some way. Many feel that the obvious next step from this understanding is to reject all that is a rejection of Christ, because that is what a good and faithful Catholic is called to do: choose God above all else. It becomes then a choice of which part of one's identity they will affirm, choosing whether to be an LGBQ person or to be a Catholic one.

The division between the Catholic and LGBQ identities is further exacerbated by the simple fact that no one person engages with theology on their own; Catholic culture and the Mystical Body, both as a whole and as the microcosm of a parish environment, deeply influence how every individual Catholic approaches theology. While the 2006 document is itself less than wholly affirming, Catholic culture is so pervaded by the aforementioned misconceptions that it is very difficult for LGBQ Catholics to have a sense of their identity and how it is perceived by the Church based in the 2006 document apart from its predecessors. "Objectively disordered," the wording used in the 2006 document, is much less harsh and identity-focused than "intrinsically disordered." Objectively disordered means that the orientation is ordered towards sin regardless of moral choice, whereas intrinsically disordered means that the orientation is always disordered in and of itself, in its very essence. Because these are so similar, differing mainly in nuance and approach, some LGBQ Catholics never hear a distinction between the two. Many parish communities throughout the U.S. still approach LGBQ people with patronizing conditional affirmation at best, so long as they stay out of sin, and suspicion or even outright aggression at worst. When facing little, if any, unconditional love and

hospitality from the Church which defines so much of their identity, many LGBTQ Catholics fall into a depressed, nihilistic approach to their faith, soaked in guilt and shame, clinging to their Savior as the one thing which keeps them from being an irredeemable, broken, filthy sinner.

One especially identity-splitting element of many Catholic environments is the culture surrounding Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body. Though it was not written *ex cathedra* and is thus not infallible, nor was it even promulgated as an encyclical, some Catholics so firmly believe in its arguments that they mistakenly elevate it to the level of doctrine, rather than approaching it as a devotional practice. Theology of the Body was given as a series of 129 lectures during Pope John Paul II's weekly Wednesday audiences, which were transcribed and later compiled into a book. It is difficult to describe, but it is referred to here as a devotional practice because it is something which may be incorporated into life to the extent that one feels is appropriate according to their relationship with and understanding of God, rather than demanding the full and active assent of the will which doctrine commands. It is a well-informed and carefully theologically explained opinion which may be adopted or rejected according to one's own reasoning and conscience. However, some Catholics perceive it to be the sole truth behind Catholic sexual morality simply because it was initially given by a pope.

Theology of the Body is a positive approach to sexual morality through a theological anthropology. Sex is presented as a natural act of mutual affirmation and expression of love, transformed in the Christian experience to include self-giving

sacrificial love as a reflection of the self-giving love among God as a Trinity of Persons.<sup>38</sup> It is rooted in the “spousal meaning” of the body, which is to say the understanding of the human body’s “*power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift* and—through this gift—fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence.”<sup>39</sup> It is a beautifully affirming approach to the body and sex for those with whom it resonates. Christopher West, a vocal proponent of TOB, writes that everything “God wants to tell us on earth about who he is, who we are, the meaning of life, the reason he created us, how we are to live, and even our ultimate destiny is contained somehow in the trust and meaning of marriage and sexuality.”<sup>40</sup> Marriage is viewed as the way in which human beings, who are inherently relational, are able to reach their fulfillment, giving wholly of themselves to another in love and being wholly loved in return in a union made possible by the very differences which distinguish man from woman,

This is a commonly held approach to TOB - and one which utterly alienates LGBTQ Catholics who are not able to share in the same experience of marriage and sexuality by virtue of their identity. A key principle of this theology is the concept of male-female complementarity, and its centrality to the definition of human sexuality. Because of an unchosen and unchangeable part of themselves, LGBTQ people cannot experience the centrality and exclusivity of male-female complementarity in their

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<sup>38</sup>David Cloutier and William C. Mattison III, “Bodies Poured Out in Christ: Marriage Beyond the Theology of the Body,” in *Leaving and Coming Home: New Wineskins for Catholic Sexual Ethics*, ed. David Cloutier (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books/Wipf & Stock, 2010), 211.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 212.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 213.

experience of the sexual nature of human beings, and thus cannot truly participate in a “Catholic” approach to positive sexuality except by cutting themselves off from it. If this is the only proper theology behind rote doctrine that LGBQ Catholics have received in their lives, which is not an uncommon experience, they are left with a sense of separation from their fellow Catholics, and internal guilt-ridden division between their senses of Catholic identity and LGBQ identity.

### **The Harm This Does**

While it must be said that some LGBQ Catholics never experience negative connotations from their dual identity, the divide and tension between these two identities, particularly through the negative lens of one half attacking the other, can be deeply harmful to the people who hold them. Not only does it harm their perception of themselves, but it also harms their relationships to God and to the people around them. Through the erosion of these relationships, it also harms their relationship to the Church, thus attacking the Catholic aspect of their identity, and cycling back to harming their self-perception. All of these ways that the LGBQ Catholic is harmed are closely interconnected, each one feeding into the others, turning any contemplation of identity into a quagmire of despair.

In feeling as though one’s identity as Catholic is diametrically opposed to one’s identity as LGBQ, a person may easily fall into a harmful view of themselves as locked in an internal stalemate, with each identity cutting the other off from fulfillment, and dooming them to never be truly complete. In particular, the LGBQ Catholic may feel cut off from the “home” of their Catholic identity: their Church and faith. Worse still, this



separation is caused by a part of themselves which they did not choose, and which they cannot divorce from themselves. It might seem that the mere existence of the identity is not enough to cause this separation, and that one has simply to choose to act in accordance with their Catholic identity and faith. They may acknowledge their LGBQ identity, but avoid committing any sinful acts towards which this identity might urge them, and in doing so they may find harmony between sexuality and faith. Yet this is sadly not the case for many LGBQ Catholics, due to the existence of human beings as embodied souls, whole in their being.

According to that very faith, human beings are made up of a unity of body and a soul, made in the image and likeness of God, and called to everlasting life in the likeness of God Incarnate. Margaret Farley writes, “at the heart of Christian belief is the affirmation that not only is the human body good, but it is intrinsic to being human...each human person — embodied and inspirited — has the possibility of and the call to a destiny of relation and wholeness as embodied spirit, inspirited body.”<sup>41</sup> There are many ways in which the Church has approached the relationship between body and soul over the years, and many ways in which the Catholic faith asserts the priority of caring for the soul over indulging the body. However, the important phrase which Farley notes in her examination of the relationship between body and soul is that the body is, according to the Church, “intrinsic to being human.” A soul which has never had a body cannot be said to be a human being. Humans exist as an embodied self, with the body as an intrinsic part of that self; therefore, a condemnation of the body is a condemnation of the self. “If you

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<sup>41</sup>Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 131.

touch my arm, you touch *me*. If you minister to my diseased body, you minister to *me*. If our bodies come together in tenderness and love, it is *we* who come together. The bodies we ‘have’ are also the bodies that we ‘are.’<sup>42</sup> The body cannot be condemned separately from the whole person who exists in that body, for by condemning the body, one condemns the person. No one is outright condemning queer bodies; however, the constant reminder that any bodily action upon attraction is sinful and must be avoided at all costs leads to a near-paranoid policing of one’s own body. Affirming queer identification while so strongly condemning all homosexual action manufactures an impossible disconnect between that which is good and licit for the soul, and bad and illicit for the body. Sullivan hauntingly describes the effect that this denial has upon the LGBTQ person striving to be a good and faithful Catholic:

By crippling the potential for connection and growth, the Church’s teachings created a dynamic that in practice led not to virtue but to pathology...they contorted human beings into caricatures of solitary eccentricity, frustrated bitterness, incapacitating anxiety - and helped perpetuate all the human wickedness and cruelty and insensitivity that such lives inevitably carry in their wake. These doctrines could not in practice do what they wanted to do: they could not both affirm human dignity and deny human love.<sup>43</sup>

Shaming the body and its desires, the way it loves, shames the whole person, diminishing existence into a never-ending anxious examination of actions to ensure one cannot be accused of living in sin, and to avoid bringing down the stigma of sinful sexuality upon oneself.

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<sup>42</sup>Farley, *Just Love*, 127.

<sup>43</sup>Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” 287.

Existing in a constant state of bitterness and anxiety is entirely opposed to a full and healthy life in God, and thus while this state is harmful in itself, it is furthermore gravely harmful in its effect of deepening the LGBTQ Catholic's sense of that the queer half of their identity forbids them from full personhood in the image of God. The strong emphasis on complementarity in Catholic sexual ethics and moral teaching means that the LGBTQ Catholic will always be incomplete in their desire to reflect and imitate the unity of God through loving another. In discussing the Roman Catholic stance on homosexuality and marriage, David Matzko McCarthy summarizes the most common stance on complementarity thus: "Man alone or woman alone does not furnish a complete image. It seems to follow, then, that two, ten, or one hundred men...do not reflect the inner unity of the Creator any better than one man alone. A man and a woman are required, and this union of two expresses a likeness to the Creator in a deeper sense..."<sup>44</sup> While rigid adherence to gender stereotypes as evidence of male/female complementarity have faded quite a bit in the Catholic tradition, the emphasis that homosexual relationships do not hold the same completeness in complementarity has stayed comparatively strong.<sup>45</sup> This incompleteness, when it is met by an LGBTQ Catholic who feels called to a vocation of married life, is quite different from a true vocation to the chaste single life, in which God is approached as one's "other half" and completion. It is instead simply a dull denial of any possibility of the same level of completion in imitating God's self-giving love to another person. Combined with the 2006 condemnation from

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<sup>44</sup>David Matzko McCarthy, "Homosexuality and the Practices of Marriage," in *Modern Theology* 13, no. 3 (July 1997), 381.

<sup>45</sup>Farley, *Just Love*, 278.

the USCCB that all homosexual acts are opposed to one's existence as a created image of God, this can easily lead the LGBTQ Catholic to feel that their identity prevents them from a life of full imitation of God, leading to a sense of diminished personhood in God.

This is sadly often accompanied by an unhealthy desire to spiritually self-mutilate by cutting out the part of oneself that is contrary to personhood in God. Such a desire is typically deeply rooted in shame, and feelings of being broken or “wrong” in the eyes of God and those around them. Such feelings are perpetuated by the stigma of sinful hypersexuality surrounding queer people: “For many Catholics and Protestants, the view of sexuality as an indomitable and chaotic drive needing above all to be tamed is gone for heterosexual sex, but it appears alive and well in judgments made about gay and lesbian sex.”<sup>46</sup> Being told that a part of oneself is inherently oriented towards sin and wrongness means that one necessarily wishes to cut this part out in order to be whole and healthy. However, when it is an unchosen and inherent part of oneself, this leads only to shame, pain, and hopelessness. In recounting his own adolescent experience with attempting to cut out this part of himself, Sullivan describes a common experience for fearful LGBTQ Catholics: “I found a way to expunge love from life...I adhered to a hopelessly pessimistic view of the world, which could explain my refusal to take part in life's pleasures, and to rationalize the dark and deep depressions that periodically overwhelmed me.”<sup>47</sup> His already depressing outlook on life was intensified by a desire to become somehow better in the eyes of God, believing that cutting out all desire and tendency

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<sup>46</sup>Farley, *Just Love*, 279.

<sup>47</sup>Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” 278.

towards sin would let him have that craved relationship with God. “So my sexuality and my faith entered into a dialectic: my faith propelled me away from my emotional and sexual longing, and the deprivation that this created required me to resort even more dogmatically to my faith.”<sup>48</sup> Emotional emptiness, depression, and hopelessness: rather than a healthy and whole image of self in God, these are the only outcomes of trying to carve out a part of one’s identity in favor of the other.

Closely related to this desire to cut out that which is cutting one off from God, the harm done to one’s relationship with God due to a sense of divided self is just as great to the harm done to one’s relationship with themselves, if not greater. I have already mentioned the feeling of being cut off from God due to an unchosen, “disordered” part of one’s identity. Yet for some, this sense of being cut off goes so far as to feel unwanted by God, unworthy in God’s eyes, and unable to cross the chasm between oneself and God purely because of an inherent and unchosen part of oneself. Furthermore, Sullivan admits that his attempts to remove that unwanted part of himself had more effects than just emotional deadness. Excising the “sinful” for the sake of likeness to and goodness in the eyes of God led to a faith with a “caricatured shape, aloof and dogmatic, ritualistic and awesome.”<sup>49</sup> Sullivan’s experience is common among LGBTQ Catholics who experience a bifurcated identity. As their sense of shame in their identity grows, so does their sense of God as being untouchable and distant. Sullivan further recounts that “a theological austerity became the essential complement to an emotional emptiness. And as the

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<sup>48</sup>Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” 279.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

emptiness deepened, the austerity sharpened.”<sup>50</sup> Emotional emptiness and spiritual emptiness grow hand in hand in mutilation of identity, as love of self, and through it love of God, begin to die.

Finally, the LGBTQ Catholic’s sense of warring identities is harmful to their relationships with their loved ones and the other people they encounter, as it seriously hinders their ability to form authentic relationships. It is impossible to truly love and support others while at the same time hating oneself. According to Thomas Aquinas, when Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew that “‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself’...it seems to follow that man’s love for himself is the model of his love for another. But the model exceeds the copy. Therefore, out of charity, a man ought to love himself more than his neighbor.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, a disordered relationship to God corrupts all other relationships. Not only is love of neighbor “inseparable from love for God”<sup>52</sup> according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Aquinas states that God must be loved first and foremost as the source of charity and love, from whence all other love flows.<sup>53</sup> Finally, it can cause the LGBTQ Catholic to feel cut off from the Church, not as an emblem of faith, but as a community. The deadened faith and emotion of which Sullivan speaks makes it impossible to form meaningful connections with other members of a faith community. Furthermore, feeling as though there is an intrinsic part of oneself

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<sup>50</sup>Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally,” 279.

<sup>51</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 26, a. 4, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3026.htm>.

<sup>52</sup>Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed., (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), §1878.

<sup>53</sup>*ST*, II-II, q. 26, a.2.

which cuts them off from the very source and summit of their faith means that one cannot possibly feel authentically part of the faith community, and cannot fully and openly relate to the other members. Thus, through the erosion of one's relationship to oneself and to God, such a division in identity erodes the LGBTQ Catholic's relationships to those around them, up to and including their relationship with their parish and greater Church communities.

## **Conclusion**

The bifurcated identity experienced by LGBTQ Catholics is for many of them a source of serious harm and spiritual distress, and ought to be taken as a call for aid from the Church which they call home. Said bifurcation arises from a number of factors, including the rampant promulgation of outdated Church teaching and practices. However, it also arises even when the most compassionate and current Church teaching is dominant, as the way the Church approaches homosexual identities creates an artificial split between the person with dignity, and the part of them which gives rise to sinful tendencies. Such a systemic and prevalent harm must not be ignored by the Church, and ought to be answered with compassionate help.

In order to address this cry for aid, the Catholic LGBTQ community needs to be able to look to strong role models to find a way to not only balance the two parts of their identities, but to find harmony and peace in God. While such role models may be found among gay Catholic writers and activists, I intend to argue that they ought to be found among the saints, as they are the most significant and important role models in the Church. In making it to Heaven, as fellow fallen humans, they provide the Church

Militant with the road map to integrating God into different aspects of their lives. They also provide special intercession for those under their patronage, giving them extra assistance on their journey to Heaven. In order to feel as though all parts of themselves are integrated into the Church, LGBTQ Catholics need the example of a saint to bring them together under their heavenly authority, given to them by God and recognized by the Church. While there is no currently recognized official patron saint of LGBTQ+ identities, there are many holy figures who are held to be unofficial patron saints by the community. Some are not yet canonized, and others, such as St. Sebastian, have been adopted because part of their life story fits with the experiences of queer Catholics on earth. In this tradition of unofficial adoption because of similarities in story, I intend to present Mary Magdalene as an ideal candidate. Though she may not yet be recognized as an official patron saint for their needs, Mary Magdalene, whose story is now characterized by an identity split outside of her control, is the perfect saint to address the specific need of bifurcation of identity for the Catholic LGBTQ community.



## CHAPTER III

### MARY MAGDALENE IN SCRIPTURE, HISTORY, AND TRADITION

#### **Identity for Mary Magdalene**

Throughout her life, and long after her death, Mary Magdalene has worn many different identities as a very popular figure in the sphere of Christian devotion. As her memory lived on in story after story, she has been assigned a number of disparate characteristics by those devoted and not so devoted to her. She has been described as the beloved disciple, the apostle to the Apostles, a repentant prostitute, and even a woman madly in love with the human Jesus Christ. The very little information about her contained in Sacred Scripture can easily be molded to fit almost any narrative one wishes to impose upon her. Indeed, it is this very imposition, especially that of ascribing a nature of sexual sin, which causes Mary Magdalene to be a beloved unofficial patron saint of those who feel defined by sexual sins, particularly if sin was only presumed rather than committed.

The many identities which Mary Magdalene has been given over the years can be condensed into two categories: that of beloved and elevated disciple, and that of penitent and atoning sinner. While both elements may be found in Scripture, each one had its own devotional cult within history. The early Church tended to revere Mary Magdalene as a cherished friend of Christ, blessed with unique knowledge and gifts, whereas the medieval Church in particular looked to the devotional solace and solidarity of seeing a

fellow sinner on the path of redemption. These two devotions, each still visible in the contemporary world, create the tension of identity which appeals to LGBTQ Catholics.

### **Mary Magdalene in Scripture**

Before any meaning can be parsed from the many depictions of Mary Magdalene throughout history, one must first turn to her original story in the Christian Scriptures.

Mary Magdalene appears very little in the Christian New Testament, and the few times she is mentioned reveal only a scant handful of things about her. However, careful study of the text and thoughtful consideration of her historical circumstance, as well as contemplation of the authors' intentions, bring far more of Mary Magdalene's story and experience to light. Between the four Gospels, Mary Magdalene is revealed to be a strong and compassionate leadership figure, beloved by God and empowered by Christ, and given special honor among His disciples.

Initial scanning of the Gospel texts reveal very little about Mary Magdalene, yet her story is fairly consistent throughout all four accounts. She is mentioned by name only thirteen times between all four Gospels combined.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this seemingly small number makes her the most often mentioned woman in the Gospels outside of Jesus' own family. All of the Gospels except Luke specifically name her as present at the Crucifixion, whereas Luke simply mentions that "all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee" (Lk. 23:49) were present. Mary Magdalene is presumably included in this, since, as her name indicates, she was from Magdala, which was located

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<sup>1</sup>Mt. 27:56, 27:61, 28:1; Mk. 15:40, 15:47; 16:1, 16:9 (long ending); Lk. 8:2, 24:10; Jn. 19:25, 20:1, 20:11, 20:18. Citations taken from the New Revised Standard Version. All subsequent references will be from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

in Galilee. The Gospel of Mark corroborates this presumption, as Mary Magdalene is specifically named as one of the “women [who] had followed him when he was in Galilee and had served him” (Mk. 15:40). She is also present at the Resurrection of Christ in all four accounts, though the Synoptics depict her with at least one other woman present (Mt. 28:1-8, Mk. 16:1-8, Luke 23:55-24:10), whereas John describes her encountering the risen Christ alone (Jn. 20:1-18). Regardless of whether she was alone or with others, she is always told by Jesus to go and tell the other Apostles what she has seen, bringing them the news that Christ had risen and inviting them to come and see for themselves. Thus, all of the Gospel narratives agree that Mary Magdalene was not only close enough to Christ to follow Him to His death, she was also given the honor of carrying the message of the Resurrection to all of the Apostles, indicating that she was an especially beloved disciple.

Mary Magdalene’s story is further fleshed out by the details which only appear in one or a subset of the Gospel narratives. Luke and Mark describe her as a woman “from whom seven demons had gone out” (Lk. 8:2) and “from whom [Jesus] had cast out seven demons” (Mk. 16:9), respectively. In the same passage naming her past affliction, Luke also mentions that she was one of the women who helped to financially provide for Jesus and his followers on their mission, indicating that she was probably a woman of some wealth. This short list of details comprises the entirety of specified details in Scripture about Mary Magdalene; however, the texts contain far more about this woman and her life than just what is explicitly described.

While details about her life in the Gospels may be few and far between, careful exegesis and interpretation reveal a further wealth of information about Mary Magdalene as a disciple. When she is described as having seven demons cast out from her, either by Jesus' hand or some other means, this most likely is an instance of referring to seven as a number of perfection and indicates then a severe ailment or disorder rather than seven literal demons.<sup>2</sup> None of the Gospels make any indication that she was traveling with a husband while following Jesus. There are several interpretations as to why this might be, including that her demonic ailment would have carried with it a stigma of impurity which would have left her ostracized.<sup>3</sup> Whether she was ostracized or not, it is also quite likely that she found Christ's message of the lowly being exalted and oppressed being vindicated personally empowering and attractive, as did many women of the time.<sup>4</sup> It is possible that she was searching for the personal liberation from societal expectations that Jesus offered in His call to focus on higher things.

Perhaps most important of all the exegesis on Mary Magdalene in Scripture is that which flows from her presence at every crucifixion and resurrection narrative. the consistent noting of her presence at the foot of the Cross indicates that not only did she follow Christ to His crucifixion, she stayed with Him up until the end: "The death of Jesus on Golgotha, where Mary Magdalene is expressly identified as one of the women who refused to leave him, leads to what is by far the most important affirmation about

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<sup>2</sup>Bart D. Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 206.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce Chilton, "Biographical Glimpses of Mary of Magdala," in *Secrets of Mary Magdalene: The Untold Story of History's Most Misunderstood Woman*, ed. Dan Burstein and Arne J. de Keijzer, (New York: CDS Books, 2006), 97.

<sup>4</sup>Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 202-25.

her...Unlike the men who scattered and ran, who lost faith, who betrayed Jesus, the women stayed...And chief among them was Mary Magdalene.”<sup>5</sup> She walked with Christ to the hill where He died, and she walked with His body to the tomb where He was laid, staying with Him until the very end. Then, she returned before any of the Apostles did, and was blessed with the honor of being the first to hear the message of the resurrection, and carry that message to the Apostles. In fact, “it could be argued that she was the most important person in the early history of Christianity, that without her declaration of Jesus’ empty tomb, the male disciples themselves may never have been inspired to proclaim the new religion.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Mary Magdalene is a crucial figure in Christian Scripture, and her story is one of devotion and honor, focused on loyalty to God and joy in the Resurrection.

### **Mary Magdalene in Gospel-Contemporary Texts**

In addition to the Gospels which make up the canon of Christian Scriptures, Mary Magdalene appeared frequently in other Christian writings from the same time period. Katherine Jansen notes in her book *The Making of the Magdalen* that Gnostic texts were often just as widely used as orthodox Christian texts in matters of devotional practice, and that Mary Magdalene was no exception.<sup>7</sup> Especially beloved in the writings of early Gnostic Christians, Mary Magdalene was a key figure in several documents from the Nag Hammadi corpus, most prominently in the Gospel of Philip. She was also highlighted in

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<sup>5</sup>James Carroll, “Who Was Mary Magdalene?,” in *Secrets of Mary Magdalene: The Untold Story of History’s Most Misunderstood Woman*, ed. Dan Burstein and Arne J. de Keijzer, (New York: CDS Books, 2006), 27.

<sup>6</sup>Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 229.

<sup>7</sup>Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 24.

the Pistis Sophia, and is the titular figure in the long-lost Gospel of Mary. Such writings lend key insights into the origins of the tradition surrounding her, and the devotional role she played in the lives of those who heard her story, as they portray Mary Magdalene as a crucial figure in the history of Christianity: the special interlocutor of Christ, and His intellectual equal. Given their Gnostic origins, these accounts are less concerned with preserving historically accurate retellings of events, and more focused on narrating conversations with the Divine which reveal gnosis, or knowledge, to humanity. This revealed knowledge could be about God, the universe, the final destination of mankind, or simply oneself.<sup>8</sup> In each work, the knowledge is not given to the reader from God directly, but rather through a conversation between Mary Magdalene and Christ in which Mary Magdalene interprets the words of God so that the rest of mankind may understand.

The writings of the Nag Hammadi corpus provide clear examples of Mary Magdalene acting as Christ's interlocutor for the rest of the disciples, lending a crucial insight into the devotion which early Christians had towards her. The earliest account of the corpus containing such a discussion is the Dialogue of the Savior. Though extremely fragmented and difficult to read, this treatise clearly depicts woman named Mariam as "a woman who understood everything," and the sole disciple who fully understood what Christ was teaching about salvation and eternal life.<sup>9</sup> While the author does not name this Mary as specifically Mary Magdalene, it seems likely that she is the one to whom the text refers, as Christ calls her "Sister" rather than "Mother," which presumably the author

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<sup>8</sup>Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 24.

<sup>9</sup>Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 208.

would use if they had intended to indicate Mary the Mother of God.<sup>10</sup> This Mary is taken up with Christ alongside two other apostles and shown “the whole of heaven [and] earth,” and her questions are the means by which the men are able to understand the truths which Christ shares.<sup>11</sup> The author seems to consider Mary to be a superior Gnostic, having received the gift of true knowledge directly from God in a way no other disciple ever did, as she is said to have spoken “as a woman who knew the All.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, this work implies that early Christians were devoted to Mary Magdalene as a wisdom figure who holds the key to understanding Christ’s teaching for our salvation.

The last significant mention of Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi corpus is contained within the Gospel of Philip, which is one of the most widely known texts from Christian antiquity on the subject of the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. Popularized in modern media, this narrative includes many passages which seem to suggest Jesus and the Magdalene were husband and wife, or at least had an intimate relationship beyond that of Master and disciple. For example, one passage reads: “And the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalene. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, ‘Why do you love her more than all of us?’”<sup>13</sup> However, it is important to note that exchanging a kiss in Christian Gnostic texts

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<sup>10</sup>Harold W. Attridge, trans., *The Dialogue of the Savior*, in *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, ed. Ron Cameron (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 43.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>13</sup>Wesley W. Isenberg, trans., *The Gospel of Philip*, in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), 136.

did not imply sexual intimacy. Those who have attained gnosis exchange a kiss as a gift of peace and knowledge, and a conveyance of grace from one to another.<sup>14</sup> The kiss is a symbol of the perfect issuance of knowledge from an inspired teacher to the one who seeks the truth which the teacher delivers, thereby finding life as they “receive conception from the grace that is in one another.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, Mary Magdalene receives an intimate kiss from her Savior and Teacher in this Gospel as a symbolic gesture, as she intimately receives the revelation of knowledge and truth which He offers His disciples. The author of the Gospel of Philip certainly seems to imply this in the Savior’s response to the disciples asking why He loves Mary Magdalene more than He loves them. “Why do I not love you like her? When a blind man and one who sees are both together in darkness, they are no different from one another. When the light comes, then he who sees will see the lights, and he who is blind will remain in darkness.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Gospel of Philip seems to further indicate that Mary Magdalene was believed by the early Christians to have a more complete knowledge than the rest of the disciples, holding a more honored position in that regard.

In her own study of the Gospel of Philip, Jansen takes this interpretation of the passage a step further, indicating an even deeper importance of Mary Magdalene’s understanding which may have been revered by early Christian groups. Jansen takes particular note of the sexual imagery within the passage, and suggests it contains meaning on both a mystical and literal level. Mary Magdalene represents the divine feminine, or

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<sup>14</sup>Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 216.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Isenberg, *The Gospel of Philip*, 136.



the Spirit, and Jesus represents the divine masculine, the Logos, and their communion is an allegory for the union which will produce the perfection of all mankind according to Gnostic theology.<sup>17</sup> The author then points to a further outcome of this recognition of the feminine meeting the masculine.

Jesus' kiss is a gift of grace, of gnosis or visionary understanding—bestowed on Mary Magdalen not despite her sex but precisely because of her sex. Conventional wisdom held that as a woman she was already inclined toward intuitive rather than acquired understanding. The apostles objected to this preferential treatment not only because they were unable to understand the mystical nature of the kiss, but also because they understood all too well that their sex, their maleness, precluded such privileged and sexually charged treatment.<sup>18</sup>

Mary Magdalene is here both literally and symbolically the feminine receiver of Jesus as a divine masculine giver. In a heteronormative tradition, where the single God is typically referred to using male-gendered words, whomever receives God and the knowledge of God must then be symbolically feminine, and thus this description of Mary Magdalene using sexual imagery is celebrating her as a perfect receptive feminine symbol.

Though not a part of the Nag Hammadi, the Pistis Sophia provides just as much insight into the devotion which early Christians had for Mary Magdalene as a wisdom figure and interlocutor. Another dialogue between Jesus and His disciples, this account commends Mary above all other disciples as possessing a uniquely perfect, God-given understanding of the mysteries of faith taught by Christ. She is the dominating voice in the conversation between Jesus and the disciples, asking nearly every question from the

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<sup>17</sup>Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 26.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 26-27.

disciples' side, and expertly recounting Christ's teaching on sin and salvation.<sup>19</sup> Jesus compliments her, saying, "Well done, Mary. You are more blessed than all women on earth, because you will be the fullness of fullness and the completion of completions."<sup>20</sup> He lauds her alongside John above the rest of the disciples: "On this account I have said unto you aforetime: 'Where I shall be, there will be also my twelve ministers.' But Mary Magdalene and John, the virgin, will tower over all my disciples and over all men who shall receive the mysteries in the Ineffable."<sup>21</sup> He also exhorts her to speak freely and without fear, promising to reveal all things she is seeking: "Mary, thou blessed one, whom I will perfect in all mysteries of those of the height, discourse in openness, thou, whose heart is raised to the kingdom of heaven more than all thy brethren."<sup>22</sup> This treatise is crucial, as Mary Magdalene is depicted as an equal, and indeed even a superior, to the rest of the disciples in her understanding of the mysteries of faith, and is commended by Christ accordingly. Her deep spiritual comprehension of liberating truth is praised by both Christ and devoted Christians, and is a perfect example of the reverence given to Mary Magdalene among early Christian communities.

Perhaps the most insightful of all early references to Mary Magdalene, the Gospel of Mary is an often overlooked yet crucial piece of history. Historians have determined that the original Gospel was written in the early second century CE, and initially promulgated in a community which recognized Mary Magdalene's authority as a spiritual

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<sup>19</sup>Ehrman, *Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene*, 209.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>G.S.R. Mead, trans., *Pistis Sophia*, II.95. <http://gnosis.org/library/pistis-sophia/ps100.htm>.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., I.17. <http://gnosis.org/library/pistis-sophia/ps021.htm>.

leader. The text as it exists today consists of roughly eight pages in total, thought to be about half of the original text. However, the currently known text has been recovered from three separate manuscripts. The majority of the surviving fragments come from a fifth century Coptic translation, which are then complemented by two third century Greek fragments. This makes it stand out among the other early sources depicting Mary Magdalene: “Because it is unusual for several copies from such early dates to have survived, the attestation of the Gospel of Mary is unusually strong.”<sup>23</sup> Such corroboration lends a particularly strong credence to the importance which the Gospel would have had among the early Christians, making it an especially insightful account when studying popular devotion of Mary Magdalene.

Even before the contents are examined, the structure of the work lends insight into the role Mary Magdalene plays within the narrative. Despite bearing the title of Gospel, it is more accurately categorized as a post-resurrection dialogue, comprised of a series of dialogues followed by departures.<sup>24</sup> First is a dialogue between the Savior and His disciples, followed by His departure; second, there is a dialogue among the disciples themselves, followed by their departure to preach; third, there is a dialogue between the Savior and Mary Magdalene, followed by her silence as a symbolic departure; lastly, there is a dialogue between the human soul and the Powers it encounters after death, followed by the soul’s departure to its place in the afterlife.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Karen L. King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

While the first dialogue stands on its own narratively speaking, the subsequent three are nested within one another, creating a chiastic portrait of the journey one takes in developing spiritually. The structure begins with the disciples in fearful contention, arguing and worrying about their physical needs. Mary Magdalene steps into the conversation and comforts them with her complete comprehension of Christ's teaching, pointing their attention back to their Savior, before relaying what Jesus had told her about the journey of the soul. Once the soul's dialogue is finished, Mary completes her dialogue with the Savior by falling silent, and the disciples' dialogue resumes, concluding in reassurance and going forth to preach.

Analyzing this structure reveals an ordered, layered teaching which draws the reader inward and back out again as they are led through a portrayal of a new relationship with God, from first bud all the way to flourishing blossom. The person begins their spiritual journey in fear and confusion, in dialogue with peers and focused on physical needs rather than the spiritual, then is drawn into discipleship and understanding of God through dialogue with God, often caused by an encounter with another disciple, culminating in a searching of the soul to root out the "Powers" of ignorance, passion, and death. "Both the content and the configuration lead the reader inward toward the stability, power, and freedom of the true self, the soul set free from the false powers of ignorance, passion, and death."<sup>26</sup> Once the soul is free from these false powers, that person can return to God to rest in joyful silence, and bring their newfound assurance and freedom to the same peers with whom they originally contended. "The hearers are not to remain in

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<sup>26</sup>King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 31.

this world, but are to follow the path of the Savior in preaching the gospel even as they are to follow the child of true Humanity within, the path forged by the soul in overcoming the Powers in ascent to the Good...Preaching the gospel is the direct consequence of understanding the Savior's message."<sup>27</sup> Dialogue, then, becomes key to properly understanding the message Christ left, and the vocation which that message brings: dialogue with others, dialogue with the Divine, and dialogue with the self. With the importance of dialogue and relationality in mind, Mary Magdalene's role in this narrative becomes crucial.

The Gospel of Mary portrays Mary Magdalene as the lynchpin to Christ's continued mission on earth given to His disciples after His resurrection, depicting her as a window into the true meaning of Christ's teachings. Peter, the leader of the apostles, turns to her as a wisdom figure, saying, "Sister, we know that the savior loved you more than other women. Tell us the words of the savior that you remember, which you know and we do not. We have not heard them."<sup>28</sup> Mary Magdalene is acknowledged as the only disciple with whom Christ shared these profound truths about the soul and the afterlife, making space for even Peter, earthly head of the Church, to revere her. Within the narrative structure of the Gospel, Mary is set up as the model of true discipleship: "Mary's complete comprehension of the Savior's teaching is signaled by her stability, her capacity to comfort and teach the Savior's words, and ultimately by her restful silence."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 31.

<sup>28</sup>E.R. Hardy, trans., *The Gospel of Mary*, in *The Gnostic Bible*, ed. Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2003), 479.

<sup>29</sup>King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, p. 30.

Mary alone has received the true gnosis and complete understanding of Christ's teaching, and from that knowledge, her first words to the disciples are ones of comfort, which she is uniquely able to offer by virtue of her devoted understanding: "Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said to her brothers, 'Do not weep and do not grieve or be irresolute, for his grace will be fully with you and will protect you. Rather, let us praise his greatness. He has prepared us and made us truly human.'"<sup>30</sup>

Finally, after her layered revelation of knowledge, followed by a detailed account of all the knowledge that Christ has revealed to her, Mary falls silent.<sup>31</sup> She, the model of perfect discipleship, becomes the image of the soul moving out of its dialogue and struggles with the Powers into a peaceful and triumphant rest with God.<sup>32</sup> Mary models inner peace in a way none of the other disciples do, as they struggle with anxiety, jealousy, and anger. The Gospel of Mary is thus a perfect example of the honor afforded to Mary Magdalene in extra-biblical early Christian texts, as it clearly sets her up both as a wisdom figure among the leaders of the early Church and as the perfect disciple in both knowledge and practice.

### **Mary Magdalene in Medieval Devotion**

Over time, the character of Mary Magdalene was slowly divorced from the real woman who knew Christ and the blessed disciple who received perfect gnosis, and transformed into an image based on misconception and the changing spiritual needs of the people. While it is difficult to precisely track the evolution of devotion to Mary

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<sup>30</sup>Hardy, *The Gospel of Mary*, 479.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 30-31.

Magdalene, a few broad strokes are visible throughout the Middle Ages. Early in the medieval period, a few papal sermons brought to light a devotion to Mary Magdalene as the sinful woman of Luke 7. The devotion visible in the papal exhortation to look to her as a symbol of penitence and hope must have been incorporated into the faith of the broader Church (whether before or after these sermons), since as the centuries progressed, more and more devotional writing about Mary Magdalene as perfect image of penitence can be found. The Late Middle Ages then saw the final and sealed transformation of Mary Magdalene in the eyes of the people from solely a beloved disciple and leadership figure in the Church into a penitent and piteous sinner, wholly dependent on the mercy of the Lord, and yet somehow still just as beloved.

In the mid to late sixth century B.C.E., Pope Gregory the Great delivered a series of well-intentioned sermons during the early years of his papacy which are the first major record of the image of Mary Magdalene as penitent prostitute in the eyes of the devotional Church. Out of the forty Gospel homilies which have been compiled and translated from the early days of his pontificate, exactly four mention Mary Magdalene; however, only homilies 25 and 33 address her as a devotional figure. Homily 25, which is on the story of Mary Magdalene encountering the risen Christ in John 20:11-18, begins by introducing Mary Magdalene as someone “who had been a sinner in the city” and saying “[h]er many sins have been forgiven her, because she loved much,” citing Luke 7:37 and 7:47, respectively, as proof.<sup>33</sup> These two passages are taken directly from the story of the woman with the alabaster jar. In using these direct quotes, Pope Gregory is

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<sup>33</sup>Pope Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. Dom David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 187.

identifying Mary Magdalene as the weeping contrite woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair.

Pope Gregory becomes more explicit in his naming of Mary Magdalene as Luke's repentant sinful woman in homily 33, which addresses that very passage in Luke 7:36-50. "This woman, whom Luke calls a sinner, John names Mary. I believe that she is the same Mary of whom Mark says that seven demons had been cast out."<sup>34</sup> He takes particular note of the seven demons, drawing upon the aforementioned tradition of viewing the number seven as the number of perfection. "How should we interpret the seven demons except as the totality of vices? Since all time is comprehended in seven days, we correctly take the number seven to signify totality. Mary had seven demons since she was filled with the totality of vices."<sup>35</sup> This is a composite Mary, conflated with disparate stories about several women other than herself, and symbolically filled with the totality of human vice and sin - a far cry from the wisdom figure of the early Church. Yet, the intention behind the message must not be forgotten. Pope Gregory's exegesis and homily on each passage is a beautiful and theologically rich exhortation to hope, containing much spiritual wisdom and comfort in God's loving mercy for a congregation mired in fear and guilt. The pope explained that if this woman, the peak of all sinners, filled with demons and haunted by a life of sin, could be forgiven to the point where she was blessed with the gift of seeing Christ first after His resurrection, then every person could have faith and hope in the saving love of God.<sup>36</sup> While the extent of the influence these

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<sup>34</sup>Pope Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, 269.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 277.



sermons had on the public devotional climate is uncertain, it is clear that Pope Gregory was intentionally condoning a devotion to Mary Magdalene as a sinner. Regardless of whether he was the one who introduced this concept for the first time or whether he was responding to popular devotion, his sermons are a clear marker of the early stages of this second branch of devotion to the Magdalene, which held her attributed identity as sinner to be just as important as her identity as beloved disciple.

The devotion which Pope Gregory the Great wrote about in the early Middle Ages was brought to its full fruition in the Late Middle Ages, as the devotional cult around Mary Magdalene became more and more popular. The general sentiment of those devoted to her can be summed up in the words of a beautiful tractate from 1639:

Whether the thrice anointing of our Saviour was performed by three severall women...or whether the same Marie which anointed him here as a sinner, was she which afterwards anointed him as a Saint...or, if we yeeld it to be Marie, whether Marie Magdalene; or, if Marie Magdalene, who this Magdalene was: Again, whether there were three Marie Magdalenes...or whether two...or whether onely one...or whether this Magdalene was sister to Lazarus and Martha, which three divided the inheritance of their father betwixt them... All these as impertinent circutations I omit; for in the silence of the holy Ghost I will not be curious. Whosoever she was, she still carries the name of what sometimes she was, Peccatrix mulier, A woman that was a sinner (sic).<sup>37</sup>

The faithful of the later Middle Ages were not particularly concerned with the historical accuracy of their devotion, but rather with relating to Mary Magdalene as a fellow sinner, and an example for their own lives as they sought to live in penitence and humility.

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<sup>37</sup>William Hodson, *The Holy Sinner: A Tractate Meditated on Some Passages of the Storie of the Penitent Woman in the Pharisees House*, (London: Publisher Unknown, 1639), 9-11. <https://www.proquest.com/books/holy-sinner-tractate-meditated-on-some-passages/docview/2240891823/se-2>.

Many priests and lay writers wrote devotional pieces on Mary Magdalene which described her supposed conversion from sinner to disciple, outlining her journey of repentance as an example for the faithful who wished to repent of their own sins. By the mid-sixteenth century, Mary Magdalene's life had even become the subject of the theater, as friars and other playwrights created morality plays featuring her "conversion" story, or some contrivance of it. A particularly notable example is *The Life and Repentance of Marie Magdalene: A Morality Play*, written by the Franciscan friar Lewis Wager in 1566. In the Prelude of this play, Wager establishes that he is writing "the storie of a woman that was right sory for that she had spent her life in sinne vile and vain (sic)" and that this woman was called "Mary of Magdalene."<sup>38</sup> The woman in the play is beset with many personified vices, and yet is able to overcome them through the love of Christ when He expelled the demons from her body, enabling her to reciprocate His all-consuming love.<sup>39</sup>

A crucial and nearly universal element of descriptions of Mary Magdalene in devotional writing was her tears, whether they be tears anointing the Savior's feet, or tears at the sight of the empty tomb, and the second loss of her Lord. In fact, multiple devotional pieces were written purely on her tears alone, and their theological and devotional significance. St. Robert Southwell, a Jesuit priest in Elizabethan England, wrote a particularly moving piece in response to a request for a devotional writing by a Mistress D. A. A glowing praise of the Magdalene's devotional love, the piece, titled *Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears*, became enormously popular in Catholic and non-

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<sup>38</sup>Lewis Wager, *The Life and Repentance of Marie Magdalene: A Morality Play* (London: John Charlewood, 1566), iii.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

Catholic devotional circles, and underwent many revisions and re-releases over a period of forty years.<sup>40</sup> Southwell begins his depiction of Mary Magdalene by describing her as “more willing to die with him, than [the apostles] to live without him.”<sup>41</sup> He continues, “But not finding the favor to accompany him in death, and loathing after him to remain in life, the fire of her true affection enflamed her heart, and her enflamed heart resolved into uncessant (sic) teares, so that burning and bathing between love and grief, she led a life ever dying, & felt a death never ending.”<sup>42</sup> Southwell’s description of Mary Magdalene is one of a painfully devoted disciple, having nothing else except the love of her Lord and Savior, and he achingly captures her exquisite pain at having seemingly lost Him, too. “She hath abandoned the living and chosen the company of the dead, and now it seemeth that even the dead have forsaken her.....she wept for having lost whom she loved, her poor eyes being troubled at once with two contrary offices, both to be clear in sight the better to seek him, and yet cloudy with tears for missing the sight of him.”<sup>43</sup> This beautifully devoted Magdalene is not, however, devoid of the stigma of sexual sin. Southwell still identifies her with the penitent woman in Luke 7: “And as in the spring of her felicity she had washed his feet with her tears, bewailing unto him the death of her own soul: so not she came in (sic) the depth of her misery, to shed them afresh for the

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<sup>40</sup>A careful study of the various versions I have found reveals a total of nine published versions of the text, beginning with the first publication in 1592 and ending with the release of the final version in 1636. The first version was not widely published, and was delivered as a manuscript in 1591. Notes for this thesis will be taken from the first published version from 1592, as this was the closest to the original I could find.

<sup>41</sup>Robert Southwell, *Marie Magdalens Funerall Teares*, (London: I.W., 1592), 1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 1-2. Edits to spelling for readability are my own.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 3-4.

death of his body.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, her tears of penitence have been transformed into tears of devotion and love at the tomb, drawing a thread between her identities as sinful and blessed.

In addition to Southwell’s descriptive text, many other authors wrote of Mary Magdalene’s tears and lamentations, particularly in the forms of devotional poems. English poet and author Gervase Markham wrote a long collection of six lamentations of Mary Magdalene, and in his introduction, explains why tears are so important in this devotion: “And *Marie* shoves us when we ought to beat / Our brasen breasts, and let our robes be rent, / How prostrating, to creepe unto the seat / Of that sweet lambe, whose bloud for us was spent: / And that we should give way unto our woes, / When the excesse no fault or errour shoves (sic).”<sup>45</sup> Markham’s six lamentations notably all take place at the tomb, and yet frequently make reference back to her tears of penitence at Christ’s feet in the house of the Pharisee. “And to embaulme his breathless corps I came, / As once afore I did annoint his feet...(sic).”<sup>46</sup> Another beautiful devotional work on Mary Magdalene’s tears comes in the form of a homily delivered and transcribed in 1620. “Mary...stood still and blubbred out many a teare, when as shee saw that *Iesus* her *Rabboni* was gone. *Stetit*, she stood still, and stood to it: not like *Peter*, a flincher, a reuolter, an abiurer of *Christ*, for he cowardly went out and wept. *Stetit*, she stood...It

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<sup>44</sup>Southwell, *Marie Magdalens Funerall Teares*, 6-7.

<sup>45</sup>Gervase Markham, *Marie Magdalens Lamentations for the Losse of her Master Iesus*, (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1992), 4. <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.udayton.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02016a&AN=day.b2346235&site=eds-live>.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

behooves *Mary* to stand to her teares...(sic)."<sup>47</sup> Her tears now shed in sorrow, once the symbol of her penitence, are now the symbol of her devotion, surpassing that of all the other apostles, and yet an ever-present reminder of the previous tears she had shed in shame.

Yet, side by side with depictions of her as a lifelong sexual sinner came devotions to Mary Magdalene as entirely blessed and loved by Christ, elevated in spite of her sinful past. For some, her sinful past itself was an indication of honor: "Their very sinnes do honour some: as the very devils that Mary Magdalene had, are mentioned for her glory, since we do not heare of them but when they are cast out: for repentance is a supersedeas that dischargeth sinne, making God to be mercifull, angels to be joyfull, man to be acceptable (sic)."<sup>48</sup> The fact that she had been sinful but was forgiven was a key part of the devotion to Mary Magdalene, as it gave the faithful hope that they too could be forgiven, no matter their sin, just as Pope Gregory had taught centuries before.

Mary Magdalene's all-consuming love of Christ even to the point of following Him to the tomb and seeking to embrace Him was also a popular subject of homilies, with priests enthusiastically exhorting their congregations to follow her example in throwing themselves at the foot of the Cross, and the feet of the risen Savior. One homily, badly fragmented yet no less beautiful for its missing parts, was delivered by an anonymous priest as far back as 1555. "She thought not to want words, when she had found The Word, and she esteemed it better to touch that word than hear ought of him...it

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<sup>47</sup>Thomas Walkington, *Rabboni: Mary Magdalens Teares, of Sorrow, Solace*, (London: Edward Griffin, 1620), 23. <https://www.proquest.com/books/rabboni-mary-magdalens-teares-sorrow-solace-one/docview/2240931285/se-2>.

<sup>48</sup>Hodson, *The Holy Sinner*, 60.

was not sufficient for her to hear Jesus speak...but she must also touch Jesus...Let us follow, brethren, the affection of this woman..."<sup>49</sup> This small fragment of a homily is a beautiful picture of devotion to a woman who had given herself over entirely to love of God that she could think of nothing else but to seek and embrace her Savior.

Holding in tension both her sexual and sinful past and her devout penitence and subsequent blessedness, Mary Magdalene's devotional cult gave her a new title, which perfectly summed up the tension already present in her identity: *beata peccatrix*, or holy sinner. The tractate referenced above, quite literally titled *The Holy Sinner*, points to Scripture as the justification for this title. "The Evangelist saith not, Behold a woman that had sinned; but, a woman that was a sinner. It is not a transient but a permanent condition that gives the denomination. Her long continuance in her trade had branded her with this title, Peccatrix mulier, A woman that was a sinner (sic)."<sup>50</sup> To the people, Mary Magdalene was the perfect model of aching penitence and humble hope in God's mercy, an exquisite balance between sanctity and sin, when past sin is cast aside and forgiven yet not quite forgotten in the midst of newfound holiness. "The beauty of the phrase *beata peccatrix* is its ability to collapse the borders of time and narrative to summon the two phases of her life simultaneously...Mary Magdalen became the paradigmatic penitential saint...she was regarded as the greatest of sinners, but also the greatest of penitents."<sup>51</sup> Her tears were a crucial expression of her penitence and sorrow at her own sinfulness,

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<sup>49</sup>Anonymous. *An Homelie of Marye Magdalene Declaring Her Ferue[n]t Loue and Zeal Towards Christ*, (London: Publisher Unknown, 1555), 5. <https://www.proquest.com/books/homelie-marye-magdalene-declaring-her-ferue-n-t/docview/2240863209/se-2>. Edits to spelling for readability are my own.

<sup>50</sup>Hodson, *The Holy Sinner*, 24-25.

<sup>51</sup>Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 206.

and yet again an expression of her perfect devotion to Christ, and so her tears became the very symbol of her status as holy sinner. “This blessed sinner, whose so precious teares. / Once bath’d his feet, that heaven and earth in binds, / And made a towell of her trayling haire, / To wipe the drops, which for her sins were shed, / Now deignes to tell how our soules should be fed.”<sup>52</sup> Sorrow and shame, joy and devotion are all intricately woven together in this image of the Magdalene, which countless medieval Christians turned to in humility to beg for intercession from she who was sinner, and yet blessed.

## Conclusion

Culminating in the Late Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene became a powerful devotional symbol in Christian communities, steeped in a multitude of traditions, and ultimately summed up in the image of the *beata peccatrix*, reminiscent of the image seen in Scripture and other early Christian texts and yet something else entirely. While devotion to her has become far less popular in contemporary Catholic culture, she is to this day inextricably recognized as a holy sinner and a model of penitence, despite no longer officially being recognized by the Church as the sinful woman. Her name is also still wrapped up in sexual contexts, perpetuated by popular media, as the next chapter will explore. The imposed identity of repentant sexual sinner, while not supported by Sacred Scripture, is also not explicitly refuted in the Bible, making it easy to continue to misunderstand her story. However, the multifaceted connotations held within the title of *beata peccatrix* create a web of complex and emotional spirituality, tangled in aching yearning and unspoken cries for God to turn and notice one’s painful longing for

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<sup>52</sup>Markham, *Marie Magdalens Lamentations*, 3-4.

redemption that one cannot possibly hope to attain on their own, compose a whispering invitation for all those who see themselves as bound and chained by an unchosen identity of sin.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONNECTING MARY MAGDALENE AND THE LIVES OF LGBTQ CATHOLICS

#### **The Two Convergences**

With the posthumous bifurcated identity of Mary Magdalene thus established, her story may begin to be examined in conjunction with the stories of LGBTQ Catholics.

There are two obvious ways in which these two stories converge: in their dual identities, and in their aspect of perceived yet uncommitted sexual sin. They are also quite similar in the long and arduous battles each story has faced in searching to erase the stigma of the aforementioned uncommitted sin. There is, however, another way in which Mary Magdalene and LGBTQ Catholics may connect, which has been alluded to previously, which may offer far more insight than a simple compare and contrast.

Rather than merely place the two stories side by side, it would be far more beneficial to examine Mary Magdalene in her story of bifurcated identity as a potential unofficial patron saint of the Catholic LGBTQ community. In doing so, one must of course examine the ways in which the stories of Mary Magdalene and LGBTQ Catholics converge. However, one must also examine the ways in which Mary Magdalene's example can encourage those who relate to her story towards salvation and whether these encouragements speak to the Catholic LGBTQ experience, and moreover, whether there are ways in which her example uniquely invites these people towards their Creator. Mindful that Mary Magdalene's imposed dual identity is characterized in part by assumed yet uncommitted sexual sin, the Catholic LGBTQ community can identify with her story in

light of her bifurcated identity, and the two messages which the twin halves of her ascribed identity hold.

### **Dual Identity**

The bifurcation of Mary Magdalene's identity has been strengthened and perpetuated in the modern world as people continue to define her with sexual sin, despite contemporary research and writing to the contrary. Given that accounts of her leadership were taken from Gnostic texts and formed as legends, they were discarded by Church leaders during efforts to reform and streamline the Catholic spiritual and devotional life. Katherine Jansen notes, "Her role as apostola, legendary as it was deemed to be, dropped out of sight altogether as Trent worked to excise all representations of the saints that were based on legend rather than history."<sup>1</sup> Notably, however, the emphasis on her prior sinfulness and subsequent penitence and contrition was not only maintained, but strengthened, even though it too was based on legend. Her name was officially extricated from Luke's nameless sinful woman in 1969, when the Church declared during a revision to the *Calendarium Romanum* (General Roman Calendar) that her role within Catholic devotional life was to be singularly that of Christ's disciple: "No change has been made in the title of today's memorial, but it concerns only St. Mary Magdalene, to whom Christ appeared after his resurrection, neither the sister of St. Martha, nor the sinful woman whose sins the Lord forgave."<sup>2</sup> Yet, the damage had been done, and Mary Magdalene is to

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<sup>1</sup>Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 335.

<sup>2</sup>*Calendarium Romanum*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1969), 131. Translation is my own.

this day frequently identified as the prostitute who repented and was blessed, particularly within popular culture.

In recent years, many scholars have devoted their studies to re-establishing a more historically accurate understanding of Mary Magdalene's identity, which has kept her identity in the contemporary world bifurcated rather than diminishing into legend. These efforts include first and foremost returning to Scripture and examining what is specifically attributed to Mary Magdalene, rather than what has been added over the course of history. Scholars, such as Bruce Chilton, analyze not only the words of Scripture, but also the ways in which the Gospels compare and contrast in their descriptions of the Magdalene, the historical circumstances which would have surrounded both her actual life and the lives of those who wrote about her, and the legends of early Christianity which arose from retellings of the canonical Gospels and Gnostic texts. In doing so, they have re-introduced the concept of Mary Magdalene as an apostle to the apostles, and a preaching leader within the early Church. For example, Chilton argues that the very fact that she bears the name "Magdalene" suggests that she was part of Christ's inner circle, and a foundational member of the early Church. He points out that Christ gave such names to His very closest disciples once they had established a long and intimate friendship, and that she alone among the Marys bears this honor.<sup>3</sup> The word "Magdala," from which is derived "Magdalene" or "of Magdala," comes from the Greek word *migdal*, meaning a low stone tower used for storing fish. Chilton notes the obvious significance which fish held as a source of life for the Jewish

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<sup>3</sup>Bruce Chilton, *Mary Magdalene: A Biography*, (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 22.

people during the time of Christ, but takes his analysis a step further by noting that the town of Magdala supplied another, much larger nearby city: Tiberias.<sup>4</sup> “Tiberias’s proximity to and economic domination of Magdala subjected Mary’s town to the forces of impurity. Tiberias produced contagion, and this contagion is what Mary carried in her body. Beyond its obvious association with fish, *this* is what the cognomen ‘Magdalene’ meant to Mary’s contemporaries.”<sup>5</sup> Chilton connects the “contagion” of Magdala to the spiritual contagion which Mary Magdalene faced when she met Christ, suggesting that this was one of the reasons for her name. Just as Tiberias infected and polluted the nearby town of Magdala, so did the seven demons infect and pollute the body and soul of Mary Magdalene before Christ cast them out. Finally, he suggests one last implication of her title as Magdalene, in that it connects her intimately with Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus the Nazarene. “English pronunciation conceals a rhyme that would have caught the ear of any Greek or Aramaic speaker who heard these names spoken aloud: The texts reverberate with an implicit connection between Jesus and Mary.”<sup>6</sup> Modern scholarship is thus concerned with reconstructing the true historical figure of Mary Magdalene, and the effort to restore her true identity as a particularly blessed disciple of Christ.

Despite their best efforts, however, the legends of her being the sinful woman with the alabaster jar have remained, whether due to tradition or to inaccurate biblical exegesis, while the richly layered devotions which stemmed from this legend have faded over time with the discouragement of the Church. In the words of Katharine Jansen, “her

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<sup>4</sup>Chilton, *Mary Magdalene*, 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

feast day, which in the Middle Ages had been celebrated by a duplex, the most elaborate of all liturgies reserved for the most important saints, was reduced to a memorial, a simple remembrance. Mary Magdalen was to be remembered merely as one of many of Christ's disciples, a pale shadow of the complexity of her symbolic significance in the Middle Ages."<sup>7</sup> The image of the Magdalene has been stripped of much of its prior significance, leaving a bare notion of her as a repentant sexual sinner and an example of penitence without the rich imagery and symbolism which the medieval devotional cult fostered and cultivated over centuries. Asking a random Catholic if they have heard of Mary Magdalene will more often than not result in a confused response of yes, was she not the prostitute who wiped Jesus' feet? Though not Catholic, singer Tori Amos describes an all too familiar scene from her childhood in which she asked her pastor about Mary Magdalene: "He and my father went into some speech about Mary Magdalene being a sinful woman, a woman of ill repute that got saved and blessed by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Then she faded into the background as if she were just one of Jesus' many followers."<sup>8</sup> While modern scholarship has done much to restore her good name in the eyes of the Christian faithful as well as the rest of the world, it has not been able to fully wipe out the falsehoods perpetuating Mary Magdalene's imposed identity of sexual sinner.

Admittedly, this restoration has come alongside an even bleaker backslide, as many modern depictions outside of the scholarly world have focused on the enticingly

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<sup>7</sup>Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 336.

<sup>8</sup>Tori Amos, "Piece by Piece: How Mary Magdalene, the Patriarchy, and Sinsuality Have Influenced My Life and Career," in *Secrets of Mary Magdalene* ed. Dan Burstein and Arne J. de Keijzer, (New York: CDS Books, 2006), 270.

scandalous nature of the identity of a holy prostitute. Perhaps more damning than the previous consolidation of biblical women are the depictions of Mary Magdalene in popular media. Numerous books, plays, and songs label her as a reformed prostitute, or at least a woman defined by sexual sin and objectification, in their loose retellings of Gospel stories and Christian legends. Notable works include Nikos Kazantzakis' controversial 1955 book *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which portrays Mary Magdalene as one of many temptations for the Lord during His life. "Descending upon him with her red sandals, unplaited hair and complete armor of ankle bands, bracelets and earrings was Magdalene, the only daughter of his uncle the rabbi. The young man's mind shook violently. 'It's her I want, her I want!' he cried, and he held out his hand to give her the rose."<sup>9</sup> Mary Magdalene is here described with loose hair and adornments which suggest sexuality and sinfulness, and is clearly the object of the young man's lust. The 1971 rock opera *Jesus Christ, Superstar* further explores the idea of Mary Magdalene and Jesus having some form of a sexual relationship, going so far as to give Mary Magdalene an entire song describing her desire, titled "I Don't Know How to Love Him." Another song, written in 1996 by Me'Shell NdegéOcello, compares an unnamed woman to Mary Magdalene: "In a harlot's dress you wear the smile of a child / with the faith of Mary Magdalene / Yet you wash the feet of unworthy men."<sup>10</sup> Pianist and singer-songwriter Tori Amos wrote an entire book about the influence which Mary Magdalene's unique imposed history of holy sinner had upon her work and her fame. In it, she names Mary

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<sup>9</sup>Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. By P. A. Bien, (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1960), 26.

<sup>10</sup>Lesa Belleve, "The Saint as Pop Star: The Mary Magdalene Effect in Popular Culture," in *Secrets of Mary Magdalene* ed. Dan Burstein and Arne J. de Keijzer, (New York: CDS Books, 2006), 264.

Magdalene as the “sacred prostitute,” and while her work is deeply respectful of the saint in this identity, it is very much focused on the identity of holy sinner, of sacred prostitute, cast out and exiled by a patriarchal Church for her sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Even in her reverence, she identifies Mary Magdalene with uncommitted sin. “She is someone with whom many feel they can identify: a person who made mistakes and eventually put herself on a higher road. Perhaps for these reasons, in spite of a theological decision to officially (but quietly) change her identity, her traditional reputation remains a compelling and complex subject of interest in popular culture.”<sup>12</sup> Mary Magdalene’s simultaneous elevation and degradation in today’s culture may seem a bleak point of connection to Catholics struggling to hold together two seemingly clashing identities.

This seemingly never-ending bifurcation of identity between that of beloved and blessed, and that of sexual sinner, is a familiar sentiment to the LGBTQ Catholic in the modern world. As discussed in Chapter II, there is a terrible stigma in the Church regarding the sexuality of LGBTQ people, which tends to conflate mere orientation with active desire and intent to pursue said desire. People with homosexual orientations are, either implicitly or explicitly, treated as though they are constantly experiencing irresistible sexual attraction; thus, extraordinary exhortations to chastity are made, while other forms of relationships are ignored in light of addressing this perceived danger. “For many Catholics...the view of sexuality as an indomitable and chaotic drive needing above all to be tamed is gone for heterosexual sex, but it appears alive and well in

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<sup>11</sup>Amos, “Piece by Piece,” 271.

<sup>12</sup>Bellevie, “The Saint as Pop Star,” 265-6.

judgements (sic) made about gay and lesbian sex.”<sup>13</sup> This focus on the need to address presumed promiscuity through loudly urging celibacy ignores the human need for relationship, community, and affirmation that each gay person experiences, just as much as each heterosexual person. Fr. James Alison hauntingly describes his personal experience with queer identity being reduced to sexual urges in a poignant article about how his own perception of his sexuality and identity as a gay man has changed over the years. Upon realizing he was gay, he immediately realized “that I was now cast adrift on a sea of impossibility, was an abomination, would never arrive at a safe port, had lost my parents, and worse, that my love would—could—only do harm. I would need to protect those who I loved against myself.”<sup>14</sup> At best, it stains every interaction the gay person has with a mark of shame and constant reminder of the perceived sinfulness and wrongness of their intermittent desire; at worst, this focus causes the person to perceive the LGBTQ part of themselves solely as their “unholy” desire, and that which cuts them off from true union with God. This in turn causes the person to feel split between their identity as a practicing Catholic striving for God, and their identity as an LGBTQ person striving to love themselves and be at peace, yet externally stained with an assumption of sexual sin.

The tension of identity, the sense of one’s core being pulled in opposing directions by intrinsic aspects of oneself that is experienced by LGBTQ Catholics is therefore paralleled, if not directly mirrored, by the bifurcation of Mary Magdalene’s identity. It must also be remembered that, from a Catholic standpoint, human beings are inherently

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<sup>13</sup>Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 279.

<sup>14</sup>James Alison, “Brought to Life by Christ,” in *Christian Century*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/brought-life-christ>, 31.



relational creatures, made in the image and likeness of a Triune and inherently relational God. Anthony Godzieba, in discussing the inherent relationality of the human person, eloquently recognizes love at the center of human fulfillment. “In the concrete a human person is not even able to live unless accepted and affirmed by other persons and unless he or she receives and at the same time gives love. We attain to fulfillment only by emptying ourselves out in love, so as to realize our own intentional infinity.”<sup>15</sup> Human beings seek connection with other people in order to interpret their world and discern how to act in life, informing their decisions by the examples and influence of others’ stories and the similarities to their own. With that in mind, looking to Mary Magdalene as an example and intercessor becomes an attractive option to LGBTQ Catholics, which perhaps ought to lead many of them to revere her as an unofficial patron saint.

### **The Holy Sinner’s Uncommitted Sin**

A good patron saint, unofficial though they may be, is connected to those under their patronage by far more than merely the way their story has changed over the years. Patron saints are chosen by the Church according to details from their lives on earth, and the connections which the faithful may form with the saints’ lives as they discern their own way to Heaven. For example, St. Francis of Assisi founded the Franciscan Order, and was well known during his life and during the time shortly after his death for his affinity for and skill with animals. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that two of the main patronages under St. Francis are the Franciscan Order, and animals or ecology. Patron saints are also chosen by individual Catholics during Confirmation preparation, as they

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<sup>15</sup>Anthony J. Godzieba, *A Theology of the Presence and Absence of God*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 164.

seek to connect with a saint who best represents the virtues they aspire to attain, or to whom they feel a personal connection. Many Catholics also feel a connection to a different personal patron saint later in life according to the particular joys and struggles they experience.<sup>16</sup> This is a far less official process than that of the Church Magisterium assigning a patronage to a saint, yet it is no less meaningful to those who hold such a devotion. While the Catholic Church may not have officially designated her as a patron saint for the Catholic LGBTQ community, Mary Magdalene serves as an undesignated and unofficial patron saint to LGBTQ Catholics by being a haven of connection for them, specifically in her presumed life as *beata peccatrix* and the devotional implications which arise from that externally imposed identity.

The image of Mary Magdalene as repentant sexual sinner, throwing herself on the feet of her Savior and weeping, lost and ostracized and begging forgiveness, often resonates very deeply with LGBTQ Catholics as they wrestle with their own shame in their identity. The connection felt with her story only deepens as they recognize that Mary Magdalene never committed these sins and the identity of sexual sinner has been externally imposed. This realization can frequently strike a chord with LGBTQ Catholics, particularly those who have grown up in conservative parish communities, and who have been made to feel as though they will never be seen as more than their sinful sexuality. The emotional and spiritual emptiness experienced by many LGBTQ Catholics can often also draw them to the exquisitely painful blend of sorrow and yearning love of Mary Magdalene's identity through the Middle Ages. The yearning for forgiveness and God's

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<sup>16</sup>Cheryl Hadley, "How to 'Choose' a Patron Saint," *The Catholic Company*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.catholiccompany.com/magazine/how-to-choose-a-patron-saint-5788#>.

presence in grace tied to the image of the repentant sinful woman is a whispered, grieving wail in the heart of the queer Catholic who feels inescapably bound and exiled by sins they have never committed. Her imposed identity of *beata peccatrix* is one of crying out in the darkness of sin and begging for the comfort of God's mercy: this cry rings and redoubles in the hearts of those who struggle to identify both as Catholic and as queer. Fr. Alison himself repeated this cry as he admitted his identity to himself and to God:

“Aware as I was that Jesus wouldn’t be wanting me, my plan was to become the best fake Christian I could. Just in case, rather than the hell which surely beckoned, God might one day at least approve my damage limitation exercise.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, even in throwing himself into forced faithfulness, Fr. Alison could not escape the impression that God was “unimpressed by my enactment of a demon constantly trying to clip its own wings.”<sup>18</sup> Fr. Alison’s aching words represent a painful fear in the hearts of many Catholics who are wrestling with balancing an LGBQ identity: that they are simply incompatible with God’s love by their very nature. Mary Magdalene, in her composite devotional identity of sinner and saint, becomes a touchpoint for weary LGBQ Catholics who feel that they too are searching for redemption from an entombed God who cannot answer, cut off from them not by stone, but by their sinful identity.

### **The Magdalene’s Symbol of Hope**

However, Mary Magdalene’s connection to the Catholic LGBQ community does not stop in the depths of exquisite suffering. The Church designates patron saints of

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<sup>17</sup>Alison, “Brought to Life by Christ,” p. 31.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

diseases and other negative situations not to merely give the faithful a figure with whom to commiserate, but to elevate symbols of hope and intercessors in time of need for the faithful on earth. As an unofficial patron saint of the Catholic LGBTQ community, Mary Magdalene must be examined inasmuch as she may extend hope and inspiration towards salvation to them. Thus, even as the image of the *beata peccatrix* pierces the aching hearts of LGBTQ Catholics in its pleading cries for the comfort of God's mercy, that image must also be held in balance with Mary Magdalene's true identity as the blessed apostle to first see the risen Christ, and thus the reception of that very mercy and love so desperately craved.

Mary Magdalene's story offers not only the common ground of bifurcated identity, but also hope for that split in identity to be resolved, if not removed, in the future. Her legacy has undergone many changes throughout the years, but it has always returned to one of deep love and honor. Even when she was predominantly known as a sinner, she was reverently titled "holy" and honored as an example of perfect contrition and piety. Now, centuries later, her name has been restored as one of elevation and blessedness among the disciples. Beginning with the declaration from the Church in 1969, scholars and theologians have worked to promulgate the story of Mary Magdalene extricated from the stories of the other, nameless women with whom she was conflated all those years ago. Despite the regression of secular depictions, recognition of Mary Magdalene as a blessed and innocent disciple has steadily grown over the past several decades. More and more people are learning that Mary Magdalene never truly held the identity of sexual sinner, nor even of *beata peccatrix* as it was meant in medieval

devotions. In time, perhaps, the myth will be put to rest, and Mary Magdalene will finally be revered as the wise and blessed leader that she was, and her sanctity will be preserved from the stain of a presumed life of sin. This hope extends to LGBTQ Catholics as well, for though it may seem unlikely, they may always hope that by the grace of God, the hearts of others and themselves may be touched and healed, and all perceived division will fall away in favor of viewing all inherent, unchosen identities as lovingly created and instilled by God.

In the meantime, while there is still division in her story, many scholars such as Katherine Jansen and Bruce Chilton have preserved the beauty of devotion to Mary Magdalene in all aspects of her many stories, creating for modern Catholics an elegantly woven tapestry of piety and complex relationships. Chilton, as previously mentioned, has written a great deal on the historical Magdalene, the truth behind her Scriptural story, and the importance of honoring this holy saint in her true self. Jansen devoted an entire book to exploring the complexities of the medieval devotional cult surrounding Mary Magdalene, and all the beautiful messiness that arose from the devotional dialogue. Her work reveals the reverence which was offered to the Magdalene even in the midst of calling her a sinner, as her sin could not be divorced from her redemption and rebirth. Mary Magdalene's name will never be entirely divorced from the image of sexual sinner, but because of the work of these scholars and their colleagues, neither will it lose the title of *beata*, of blessed and holy. Her perceived identity, though admittedly still divided, has over the years become new and nuanced to those who are willing to look beyond cultural assumptions. To these discerning eyes, her bifurcated identity becomes one again, layered

with historical meaning and imbued with the reverence which the faithful have poured into it. She is both the apostle to the apostles, and the carefully layered devotional figure of *beata peccatrix*. She is a revered leader of the Pilgrim Church, and at the same time an exquisite example of throwing oneself entirely upon the mercy of God. She is not one or the other; she is both in the eyes of many modern devotees. This newness, along with those who see it, is what offers LGBTQ Catholics hope. They may never be able to entirely separate themselves from the stigma of suspected sinfulness, but they can never be stripped of their baptismal birthright. Instead, they may look to Mary Magdalene's complexly layered identity and form their own nuanced concept of identity, embracing the uncertainty and tension and claiming it as a part of who they are, made in the image and likeness of God.

More important, however, is the hope in God's steadfast and merciful love which may be gained from her story. It must not be forgotten that Mary Magdalene is a saint in Heaven, and revered by the Church as such, regardless of which background is ascribed to her. Regardless of the perception of others, regardless of the number of people who believe she was a sexual sinner, regardless of how long this myth is perpetuated, she is forever welcomed into the arms of God and blessed with eternal salvation, and nothing can take that away. This certainty is a gift which she passes to the Church Militant on earth: God exists and operates above the pettiness of fallen humanity. Andrew Sullivan echoes this hope in God in his account of the first time he explicitly addressed his sexuality with anyone:

Looking back, I realize that that moment at the Communion rail was the first time I had actually addressed the subject of homosexuality explicitly in front of anyone; and I had brought it to God in the moments before the most intimate act of sacramental Communion. Because it was something I was deeply ashamed of, I felt obliged to confront it; but because it was also something inextricable—even then—from the core of my existence, it felt natural to enlist God’s help rather than his judgment in grappling with it.<sup>19</sup>

Even when the burden of fear and shame is so great that the human mind and heart cannot possibly hope to carry it alone, it is natural to turn to God in God’s omnipotence. This becomes particularly important when the burden is so intimately bound with one’s identity. Regardless of how others perceive them, regardless of stigma and external shame, one may always take comfort in the knowledge that a virtuous life on earth, lived in a state of grace, will bring them to everlasting life with God.

The hope which Mary Magdalene’s story offers is further highlighted in a different yet complementary way, when her identity as *beata peccatrix* is acknowledged and embraced from a devotional standpoint. Though she was known for centuries as a woman who lived her life steeped in sin, she is still said to have stood at the foot of the Cross and laid Christ in the tomb, and even be the woman who first met the resurrected Christ. This blessing is a beautiful story for queer Catholics – though her life continues to be externally defined by a sexual sin, she is still deemed by God to be beautiful, worthy of love, and worthy to stand in His presence at the most crucial times of salvation history. Not only God, but all those who revere here, including those who perceive her as a penitent defined by her previous sin, honor her as the woman who stayed with Christ to

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<sup>19</sup>Andrew Sullivan, “Alone Again, Naturally: The Catholic Church and the Homosexual,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), 277.

the Cross, to the grave, and to the Resurrection. This tells queer Catholics that yes, they too may be certain that they are loved by God even in the midst of being told that this part of who they are a person is unnatural and sinful. Even when onlookers shame and define them by committed or uncommitted sin, even when God feels distant and untouchable by their sin-stained hands, God still sees them as worthy of love, and promises through Mary Magdalene's story to hold and treasure them. And, like the faithful who honor Mary Magdalene, there will always be faithful Catholics who see them as holy and loved by God, as fearfully and wonderfully made, ensuring that they are never truly alone in their search for solace, respect, and belonging in the community of the Catholic Church.

One particular way in which Mary Magdalene's devotional history may give hope to LGBTQ Catholics is the development of tradition surrounding how she was embodied in artwork. Throughout the Middle Ages, Mary Magdalene was often depicted with long, loose hair to symbolize her history of prostitution. Women's hair in ancient Jewish tradition was typically bound up and covered with a veil as an act of modesty, and deviating from that tradition usually meant deviating from sexual norms as well. "From time immemorial female hair—loose, bound, and uncovered—was associated with sexuality. It is revealing that in both her pre- and post-conversion lives Mary Magdalen's most predominant physical attribute was her copious and flowing hair."<sup>20</sup> She was portrayed with this symbolism regardless of whether the illustrated scene was from during her repentance, or long after. Her hair remained loose, unbound, and uncovered,

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<sup>20</sup>Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 130.



marking her as a sexual sinner yet never erasing her blessedness and ability to stand before Christ in love. Not only the symbol of her sin, her hair was also the very symbol of her repentance: “When she was a sexual sinner Mary Magdalen entered the house of the Pharisee, wept at the feet of the Lord, and dried them with her hair. It is significant that at the very moment of her conversion her hair—the symbol of her sexual sin—became the emblem of her penitence.”<sup>21</sup> Her long hair was sometimes the only thing covering her naked and sensual body, and in a sense, her nakedness also represented a vulnerability before God.<sup>22</sup> In her discussion on artistic depictions of Mary Magdalene, Jansen writes that on the other hand, “given her prior association with sins of the flesh, medieval depictions of the hair-covered and naked Magdalen did more than evoke images of edenic innocence: they also pointed back to the sexual aspect of her nudity, a reminder of her past as a sexual sinner.”<sup>23</sup> Yet, even in highlighting the image of sinner, artists could not help but highlight her image as redeemed saint, clothed in a veil of modesty which preserved her in the eyes of God, and from the eyes of sinners. The symbols of nakedness and loose hair which served as a constant reminder of her sin are also the symbols of her repentance and reclaimed innocence and honor in God’s love.

LGBQ Catholics may thus look to the art history of Mary Magdalene and see an invitation to a baptism of reclamation, purifying the symbol of their stigma in the certainty of God’s love. The symbols of Mary Magdalene’s stigma were her hair and her nakedness, whereas the symbol of an LGBQ Catholic’s stigma is, put simply, their

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<sup>21</sup>Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalen*, 130-1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 133-4.

queerness: their love which exists outside of the “norm,” even when it is not acted upon but simply existing. Like the Magdalene’s hair and naked form, love is not inherently a symbol of either purity or sinfulness, but may be applied to each in different ways. The love of a queer person, purely in itself, is no more a symbol of stigma than the love of any other. It is not sinful, broken, or wrong; it is a relational human being recognizing goodness in another, as they were created to do. Through the story of Mary Magdalene as *beata peccatrix*, revered in her sanctity by the very symbols of the sin of which she was falsely accused, God calls LGBTQ Catholics to approach their journey to sanctity and grace not in spite of their identity, but through it and embracing it. While it is certainly not a “free pass” to act against the teachings of the Church, it is a loving invitation to embrace one’s whole self, as created by an all-knowing and perfect God, and to thus finally feel complete in God’s love.

### **Seeking the Savior**

Comfort and hope, however, must not be where Mary Magdalene’s influence ends; rather, in order to truly be perceived as an unofficial patron saint, her story ought to be an inspirational motivation towards God for those who seek her patronage. The Magdalene herself did not simply sit idly by, hearing the message of Christ and going about her life with resolve to live according to His teaching. Rather, she followed Him to the foot of the Cross, stood by Him in His Passion, walked with Him to His grave, and watched His body as He was laid to rest. Even then, in the time of waiting for the Resurrection, she did not sit in mourning, wrapped in her own grief. She went to the tomb to search for Him and anoint Him once the Sabbath was over, to honor Him even in

death. According to the Gospel of John, when Jesus was not in the tomb, she ran and brought some of the Apostles to see for themselves. After they left, she alone remained, weeping, her heart seeking her Savior. For her patience and fidelity, she was rewarded. Jesus appeared to her first of all the disciples, and asks her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”<sup>24</sup> She responds out of great love and faith, still seeking her Lord, and hoping to do Him the honor of returning Him to His grave so that He may rest in peace. This love and active seeking is repaid with an intimate call from Christ, as He speaks only her name. That one word was enough for her to know Him. One word, filled with far more love and emotion than mere words on a page of a Bible could ever convey, brought her the comfort of knowing her God was by her side. And yet, even in this moment of intimacy, she did not rest or stop seeking. After she turns and calls to Him in return, Christ warns her, “Do not hold on to me” (Jn 20:17), very possibly indicating that she rushed to embrace Him. While this could of course also mean that Jesus was warning her not to try to keep or “hold” Him on earth because He needed to return to the Father, there is also a long history of reading this passage as an indication of Mary Magdalene rushing to embrace Him. So overwhelmed with joy and love, she could not help but reach to be closer.

This is the final offering which Mary Magdalene’s story brings to LGBTQ Catholics: an urge to seek God, and bring oneself ever closer to union with God. Granting that her story is still colored by a tradition of identifying her with an uncommitted sexual sin, Mary Magdalene was still the first of the disciples to whom Christ appeared

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<sup>24</sup>John 20:15, New Revised Standard Version. All subsequent references will be taken from this translation and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

according to the Gospel, and she was intimately called by name. Not only that, but she was only discouraged from embracing Him because he had “not yet ascended to the Father” (Jn 20:17). Christ did not forbid her from touching Him because of some sin, because of her past reputation, or because she was unworthy. He did not deny or discourage her from seeking, and that ought to be noteworthy to queer Catholics who have felt cut off from any closeness with God, or perhaps even from seeking, due to their identity. God never denies the divinely beloved from searching for intimacy and closeness.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, Mary Magdalene offers far more than sorrow and shame to the LGBTQ Catholic searching for connection. Such a connection may provide some solace in knowing one is not alone in one’s sorrow, to be sure; yet, Mary Magdalene points above heads bowed by shame to the risen Christ as an invitation to reach beyond the cold comfort of solidarity in suffering. Her true story is one of blessing and reward for deep faith, even when all seemed hopeless and lost. The story constructed by those faithfully devoted to her redoubles this hope, calling to the sorrowful in the depths of their despair and showing them a way into the light of God’s love. These two stories intertwined, however, are what bring the most hope and comfort to a soul aching from a division of self: God can heal all wounds, including those which divide oneself. The hope and assurance that Mary Magdalene’s story provides are what truly make her a beautiful example to the Catholic queer community: the hope that one will eventually be recognized as holy and striving for God and so much more than the assumptions others

impose upon them, and the assurance in one's own dignity and rightful place as beloved child of God.

Beyond hope and assurance, her story also brings an inspiration to seek out God regardless of fear or shame. Mary Magdalene never stopped seeking and following Christ, not even once He was dead and buried in the tomb. Nor did she cease her search when He had disappeared, and all the disciples had left her and returned to where they were staying. Likewise, LGBTQ Catholics must not cease to seek out God when God has seemingly disappeared from their lives once they discover their queer identity. They are of course called to the faithful following of God that Mary Magdalene exemplified in her Scriptural life, a fidelity which God lovingly accepts regardless of external stigma; yet, they are also called to follow in her footsteps to the tomb of separation. When God seems to be in that tomb, constructed out of their "sinful" identity rather than stone, that is the time for them to return day after day to the tomb, seeking to anoint and purify their relationship with God. While they may not immediately find Who they are looking for, they must remain by the tomb, even if they are abandoned and alone, as Mary Magdalene was left alone by the apostles. They must have faith that God will meet them in their tireless search, and that in time, the stone which separates them from peace will be rolled away, and they will be free to rush to embrace their Creator.

Thus, it is clear that Mary Magdalene is a perfect candidate for an unofficial patron saint of the Catholic LGBTQ community. Her story shares multiple connections with that of LGBTQ Catholics, in that it is a story of bifurcated identity, in which one identity is stigmatized by an uncommitted sexual sin, and that this stigma, while it adds a

many layered aspect of penitence, redemption, and gratitude, must also be fought so that the deserved respect and sanctity may be recognized. Given these connections Mary Magdalene's story also offers comfort and hope to LGBTQ Catholics. It offers comfort in knowing their experience is not unique and they are not alone, hope in a better future in Heaven, and still another comfort in their undeniable dignity, and the unwavering, unending love God holds for them. Finally, her story serves as an inspiration to LGBTQ Catholics as they seek to navigate their earthly lives. Through the story of her devotion to Christ, they are called to be ceaseless in their effort to seek out and follow God, even when they feel unworthy or cut off due simply to who they are. Through her bifurcated identity, Mary Magdalene is a beautiful inspiration to the Catholic LGBTQ community, and adopting her as an unofficial patron saint to the community and the individuals therein would prove invaluable to those who are struggling to feel connected to and wanted in the Catholic Church because of who they are, and who they love. Her patronage would offer comfort and inspiration, and the overwhelming relief of knowing that she is an intercessor on their behalf, pleading for them before God. She, as intercessor, wants them in the Church as their home and welcomes them, and through her story and intercession, offers reassurance that God wants them home, too.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

As I write the conclusion of this thesis, now eighteen months from its conception and nine months from its true origin, I find myself pondering the many ways in which the emphasis has changed since my initial concept. I began this thesis in a spirit of hope and inspiration, seeking to bring to light a personal devotion to a saint who spoke to my experience, and to the lived experiences of countless people like me. As I continued writing, I found myself falling more and more into a spirit of sorrow, aching for the pain of my community, and for the loss of my beloved saint's good name. Yet, as I kept pouring words into these pages, I eventually returned to my inspiration: not, this time, in a sense of sharing my small joy in devotion, but instead in a sense of sharing a fierce determination to hold onto the hope and radiant joy which Mary Magdalene's story conveys. My journey in writing this thesis has strongly echoed the journey which takes place in its pages, and I find myself wondering if this, too, was influenced by my chosen patroness.

My intention for this thesis was to bring attention to an unseen wound in the Mystical Body, and propose a way forward for those who suffer in this way and those who seek to speak healing into that pain. Chapter II shone light into the dark crevices of that wound, and brought into the open the ways in which the Church has tried to come to terms with it, and yet never quite solved the problem of an identity broken in two. Many have tried to heal the rift of identity in different ways, and yet there has not seemed to be

a perfect method. Chapter II was somber and heavy, and focused heavily on demonstrating the pain of loss of wholeness of self that comes from having two innate and unchosen parts of oneself tugging them in seemingly opposite directions.

Chapter IV was truly the response to this tomb-like chapter, as it brought the conversation out of wallowing in darkness and into a hopeful light. Mary Magdalene's story is a perfect devotional symbol for the LGBQ Catholic, as she lived her life in virtue and love of God, and yet was defined by sexual sins which others assumed she must have committed. The LGBQ Catholic is also often defined by such sin, as heterosexual Catholics often look at LGBQ people and see only the identity tied up in sexual connotation, and do not truly see the person without the connotation of sin. A person can hold an LGBQ identity while still living in a chaste way according to Catholic teaching, and yet they are still stigmatized by sins they do not commit. Mary Magdalene's story and identity as *beata peccatrix*, explored and explained in Chapter III, provides the solidarity and hope needed to face the stigma, and move forward confidently, assured of God's love and a greater peace in the life to come.

My inspiration for this thesis came from my partner in crime and best friend, Chelsea Kay, who first introduced me to Mary Magdalene as a devotional solace for LGBQ people aligned with the Catholic tradition. My inspiration only grew upon taking Dr. Laura Elie's *Foundations of Church History* course in the fall of 2020, when we spent a long time working with Jansen's book, cited often within the body of the thesis. The idea of being a *beata peccatrix*, with an identity intimately wrapped with both sin and sanctity, strongly resonated with me as a queer Catholic, and also as a Campus



Minister speaking with students about their lived experiences as LGBTQ Catholics themselves. The recurring trend was a lonely, aching question: how do I feel at home in the Catholic Church when I am also queer? My conclusion from my research is that we, my queer siblings in Christ, find our home in the Church through the intercession and example of Mary Magdalene. With her as our trailblazer, we are loved, we are accepted, and we are home.

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