

## FROM RENOVATION TO RENEWAL: THE MESSAGE OF ST. MARY MAGDALEN DE' PAZZI FOR A POST-CONCILIAR CHURCH

The proclamation came as a clarion call in a letter written by the young Carmelite novice to a Jesuit priest: "The determined time has come, predestined from all eternity in the mind of God and so longed for by His servants past and present – the time for the renewal of His Bride, the Church".<sup>1</sup> The herald of this declaration was St. Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi, and the determined time was 1586, twenty years after the conclusion of the Council of Trent.

In the summer of that year Mary Magdalen experienced ecstasies concerning the Church, and in the course of the encounters she dictated twelve letters to some leading religious figures of her day. These letters were gathered into a manuscript entitled *Renovazione della Chiesa*. The Italian word "*renovazione*" can be translated into English as "renovation" or "renewal", although the two words carry different nuances in our language. "Renovation" is often used to describe the physical alteration of a church building, while "renewal" suggests a broader, dynamic process of rejuvenation. For the sake of our exploration, we might think of renovation as a visible expression of renewal. True spiritual renewal will lead to external change, be it in personal conversion or ecclesial life; on the other hand, exterior change does not necessarily indicate interior renewal.

As a woman religious in late sixteenth-century Italy, Mary Magdalen was concerned about the ecclesiastical reforms called for by the Council of Trent, but as a great mystic she was more concerned about the profound spiritual conversion which was the desired goal of those reforms. We who are the heirs of the Second Vatican Council seek to live out the vision of that historic event in the pilgrimage of the Church. The writings of this remarkable woman offer insights into how the renewal called for by an ecumenical council might be realized.

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<sup>1</sup> FAUSTO VALLAINC (ed.), *Tutte le Opere di Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, Volume Settimo: *Renovazione della Chiesa*, Centro Internazionale del Libro, Florence 1966, p. 84. Unless noted, translations in this article are by the author.

## I. RENOVATION: THE LETTERS OF ST. MARY MAGDALEN DE' PAZZI

When Caterina de' Pazzi was a little girl the historic churches of her native Florence were undergoing significant renovation. Choirs were demolished, rood screens removed and private chapels destroyed to permit greater visibility of the high altar, as an incentive for better lay participation in the celebration of the Mass. Like the reordering of churches following the Second Vatican Council, these changes were not mandated by specific decrees, but arose more or less spontaneously as an expression of the times. Between 1565 and 1575 the noted painter and architect Giorgio Vasari oversaw, at the behest of Cosimo de Medici, the renovation of two of the premier churches of Florence, Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella. Several factors contributed to this dramatic enterprise: the religious leaders were anxious to express their commitment to the vision of the Council of Trent; Cosimo de Medici saw the project as a way to ingratiate himself with the pope; and Vasari viewed the alterations as an opportunity to sweep away the clutter of medieval centuries and exalt the beauty of line and unity of space so prized in the Renaissance. Once the choir was relocated, the separate chapels demolished and a large wall torn down which had separated the laity from the area reserved to the friars (including the high altar), Vasari could boast that the changes made Santa Maria Novella "appear to be a beautiful new church, as it really is".<sup>2</sup>

The renovated churches were a visible expression of the post-conciliar enthusiasm sweeping through Europe. The city which had been the birthplace of Renaissance humanism sought to embrace the rather austere, devotional and affective piety of the Tridentine reform movement. Older orders, like the Dominicans, championed the religious revival, and new orders – most notably, the Society of Jesus – offered fresh expressions of religious life. Winds of renewal fanned the flickering flame of the Carmelite Order, prompting reform movements in Italy and France, and a new branch of the order in Spain. The spiritual descendents of the hermits of Mt. Carmel sought, in the words of St. Mary Magdalen, to return to "the rigor, the simplicity, and the purity of life" of their origins.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> MARCIA B. HALL, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation: Vasari and Duke Cosimo in Sta Maria Novella and Sta Croce*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> GIULIANO AGRESTI, (ed.), *Tutte le Opere di Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, Volume Quinto: *Probatione*, Prima Parte, Centro Internazionale del Libro, Florence 1965, p. 95.

We do not know what Caterina made of the dramatic alterations to the churches of her childhood, but her upbringing was certainly shaped by the devotional climate of the times. Although she was named after her grandmother, the girl gloried in her name primarily because of her devotion to St. Catherine of Siena, whose doctrine and spirituality influenced her greatly. Another saintly Catherine was living in nearby Prato, Catherine di Ricci. Caterina de' Pazzi knew about her from mutual friends and treasured a book relating remarkable events in the holy woman's life. It is not surprising that this devout young girl should choose to enter religious life, but what attracted her to the Carmelites at Santa Maria degli Angeli was an aspect of their life expressive of *aggiornamento* in the sixteenth century: they encouraged the frequent reception of Holy Communion. The sixteen-year-old entered the Carmelite monastery in November of 1582, less than two months after the death of Teresa of Avila.

Sister Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi had experienced religious ecstasies before entering the monastery, but these became much more intense after her admission to Santa Maria degli Angeli. She and her companions were troubled by these remarkable happenings, and referred the matter to the priests responsible for the spiritual life of the community. (Since 1521 this responsibility had passed from the Carmelite friars to the Archbishop, who designated Dominican and Jesuit confessors to serve the convent.) The priests asked the sisters to record these experiences, and upon examination judged them to be authentic: in their opinion Mary Magdalen was neither mentally unbalanced nor misled by demonic forces. It is important to note that, as dramatic as these experiences were, they remained virtually unknown to the world outside the monastery. Mary Magdalen's diffidence should also be borne in mind. Far from seeing herself as a prophetic figure on a mission from God, Mary Magdalen felt her extraordinary experiences to be a burden, one which she assumed with humility and reluctance. She believed that these communications came from God, but she sought confirmation for that conviction in the judgment of her sisters and the priests responsible for the convent.

The letters dictated in 1586 speak repeatedly of de' Pazzi's "*ansiato desiderio*" for the renewal of the Church, but such anxious desire had marked her religious life all along. She saw the cloistered vocation as truly ecclesial, and she was drawn to embrace it not only by her own love for Christ, but out of love for the Church. Indeed, what pained her was to see Christ so neglected by the members of His Body. One night in Advent, 1583, the young novice remained behind in choir and was found there later reduced to tears, repeating, "O Love, you are neither

known nor loved, but only offended!”<sup>4</sup> This anxiety for the Church was frequently repeated; Mary Magdalen was saddened by the ignorance and blindness of so many Christians, and she desired to offer herself for the renewal of the Church. Sister Vangelista del Giocondo, who knew the saint all of her religious life, testified in the canonical process that she spoke constantly about the salvation of souls.

The immediate context for the letters collected as *Renovazione della Chiesa* is as follows. After a period of exhilarating spiritual ecstasies in which the saint received many divine favors, God led her into an experience of the Dark Night which lasted for five years, from 1585 to 1590. It was a time of intense testing: unspeakable spiritual dryness, temptations to despair, diabolic trials and even thoughts of suicide. She said she felt like Daniel cast into the lions’ den. There was a small oasis in this desert, a brief space lasting from July 20 until the end of September, 1586, when the clouds lifted a bit and Mary Magdalen experienced the ecstasies which prompted the dictation of twelve letters regarding spiritual renewal of the Church.

Scholars today hold varying opinions about these letters. One author claims that they represent “...the most authentic and revealing document of the rich personality of this great contemplative, brimming over with anxiety for souls and love for the Church”;<sup>5</sup> for others, “These letters remain somewhat mysterious for us readers of a later age, far removed from the psychology of their author and from the historical context of the Church in which they saw the light of day”;<sup>6</sup> Fausto Vallainc, who edited *Renovazione della Chiesa* for the publication of St. Mary Magdalen’s collected works in the 1960s, maintains that the letters are of perennial value because they touch on fundamental aspects of the life of the Church:

The “vision” of mid-August 1586 was not the summer reverie of a fragile soul, but the prophetic contemplation of a truth which transcends particular persons and times and which is rooted in the essential structure of the Church – a reflection on the love of Christ for all of humanity which purifies its members continuously in order to establish them in His grace and His glory at the end of time.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> BRUNO SECONDIN, *Santa Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi: esperienza e dottrina*, Institutum Carmelitanum, Rome 1974, pp. 116-117.

<sup>5</sup> ERMANN0 ANCILLI, *La passione di Santa Maria Maddalena de’Pazzi per la Chiesa*, in «Ephemerides Carmeliticae», 17 (1966), p. 410.

<sup>6</sup> PAOLA MOSCHETTI - BRUNO SECONDIN, *Maddalena de’ Pazzi, mistica dell’amore*, Edizioni Paoline, Milan 1992, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> VALLAINC, *Tutte le Opere...: Renovazione della Chiesa*, pp. 38-39.

While the message may be perennial, the medium was decidedly of its age. The flowery, baroque imagery of Mary Magdalen's visions is not to the taste of most moderns; we live in a time when emotional religious expressiveness is considered bad form, and we may be somewhat uncomfortable reading the descriptions of her spectacular experiences.

The language of the letters is dramatic, but their content reflects an astute awareness of the levers of spiritual authority in sixteenth century Italy and a calculated application of pressure to those levers. The young novice is mounting a campaign and the recipients of her letters have been carefully chosen: the pope, the college of cardinals, and her own archbishop; local representatives of three important religious orders (the Dominicans, the Jesuits and the Minims); and two women renowned for their sanctity, Veronica of Cortona and Catherine di Ricci. Renewal of the Church would come about through the efforts of the hierarchy, the religious orders, and holy individuals – and Mary Magdalen was anxious to encourage those efforts.

Was she audacious? De' Pazzi herself was reluctant to undertake this mission, and did so only because she was absolutely convinced that this was God's initiative, not hers; and she had received confirmation of this conviction from prudent and learned theologians. Furthermore, she had the example of her great model, Catherine of Siena, who had challenged the pope in her day to return to Rome. Finally, humble Carmelite though she was, Mary Magdalen belonged to one of the most prominent families of Florence. She had grown up in a world of prelates and princes, and Maria de' Medici – the future queen of France – was a childhood friend.<sup>8</sup> A woman who grew up in a palace designed by Brunelleschi would not be intimidated by worldly prestige.

Mary Magdalen assumes a tone which is both courageous and modest in these epistles. She frequently refers to her own unworthiness in writing as she does, and seasons her entreaties with dashes of flattery. For example, when writing to the Archbishop of

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<sup>8</sup> When Maria was leaving for Paris, she visited Mary Magdalen and asked her to pray for three intentions: 1. That she would produce a male heir. 2. That she would be loved by the king. 3. That she would not lose the Kingdom of Heaven because of the Kingdom of France. The Carmelite promised to do this, and prayed every Saturday to the Blessed Virgin for these intentions. She in turn had three requests to make of Maria de Medici: 1. That she would work to restore the Jesuits to France. 2. That she would struggle against heresies there. 3. That she would assist the poor. Mary Magdalen's requests demonstrate how concerned she was about the cause of renewal.

Florence she compares the bishop to the sun and herself to the moon – “But as you know, when someone is assisted by the lesser light of the moon, this is no disparagement of the light and splendor of the sun; but it happens that the very insignificance of the lesser light serves to make the clarity and brilliance of the sun more apparent”.<sup>9</sup> She also proposes inspiring examples of holiness appropriate to her recipients. Thus the pope is exhorted to imitate St. Peter; the cardinals should follow the example of saintly princes of the Church like St. Jerome, St. Bonaventure, and the recently deceased Charles Borromeo; and the Jesuits are urged to draw inspiration from the heroic labors of their companions in the Indies.

There are several themes running through the letters. Bruno Secondin proposes five of them:

- A. The “Bled Lamb”<sup>10</sup> thirsts for the renewal of His Bride, the Church. This ardent desire is what motivates Mary Magdalen to write.
- B. The fundamental renewal must be an interior transformation which gives us a new heart in order to comprehend the mystery of God’s love expressed in the ministry of Christ’s blood. This interior renewal should not be prompted by a desire for prestige or practical results, but primarily “through love and with love”.
- C. This interior renewal expresses itself in a greater reverence for the blood of Christ, and a desire to drink more deeply from the fountain of divine life. This desire produces external virtues such as poverty, charity, purity, patience and perseverance. By means of these virtues the whole Church will be renewed.
- D. Those in greatest need of this renewal are priests and religious (whom Mary Magdalen refers to as “christs” and “spouses”).
- E. The tools for effecting this renewal are disciplinary sanctions, theological instruction, preaching and prayer.<sup>11</sup>

We will examine these themes in more detail later. For now, two points should be noted. First, the specific “techniques” of renovation come at the end of the list: more fundamental is an interior experience

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<sup>9</sup> VALLAINC, *Tutte le Opere...: Renovazione della Chiesa*, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> “*Svenuto Agnello*”, a term used occasionally by St. Catherine of Siena, and frequently by St. Mary Magdalen.

<sup>11</sup> SECONDIN, *Santa Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi: esperienza e dottrina*, pp. 369-371.

of conversion, and more fundamental still is the salvific desire of Christ. Secondly, the transformation is seen by Mary Magdalen in terms of an acceptance and imitation of the sacrificial love of Christ, symbolized by the shedding of His Blood.

The addressees would be sympathetic to her appeals for reform. Pope Sixtus V reigned from 1585 to 1590, the very years of Mary Magdalen's experience of the desolation in "the Lions' Den". A few days after his election, the Carmelite had a vision of the Cross planted as a beautiful tree in the garden of the Church, and then saw the new pope holding a large cross in his hand. Formerly a Franciscan friar renowned for his asceticism and preaching, Sixtus was nicknamed "the iron pope" and dedicated his energies to the implementation of the decrees of the Council of Trent, primarily by means of a thorough reorganization of the administration of the Church. Mary Magdalen urges the Holy Father to contemplate Christ crucified and imitate His self-emptying: "Strip yourself entirely of yourself, and clothe yourself with Him,"<sup>12</sup> apt advice for a son of St. Francis. She also wrote to the college of cardinals, urging them to assist the pope in his religious mission.

The Archbishop of Florence, Cardinal Alexander de' Medici, was a favorite disciple of St. Philip Neri, so he would be well-disposed to the cause of renewal – although it took nine years to get him to move from Rome to his diocese. Alexander belonged to a collateral branch of the powerful Medici family, and was also related to Pope Leo X on his mother's side. He was a deeply devout man with connections to the Dominican community of San Marco, which had been the home of Savonarola. Mary Magdalen wrote three letters asking him to visit her at Santa Maria degli Angeli. Both she and St. Philip told Alexander that he would be elected pope but would have a brief reign. He was indeed elected in April 1605, and took the name of Leo XI; perhaps his pontificate would have associated that name with the zeal of religious renewal as his uncle's had linked it to Renaissance splendor, but he was dead within the month.

Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi was convinced that the religious orders had a pivotal role to play in the renewal of the Church. This was true both because religious communities constituted a significant element in the populace and because the laxity of many religious was proverbial. A survey of Florence in 1552 reported that there were fifteen communities of men and forty-five communities of women, in

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<sup>12</sup> VALLAINE, *Tutte le Opere... Renovazione*, p. 65.



a population of 60,000. The relative wealth of many of these communities and the custom of accepting young children who did not have a vocation had created a situation in which, as Mary Magdalen complained, "... the three vows are promised by many in their religious profession, but observed rarely".<sup>13</sup>

For this reason, she addressed letters to local representatives of the Dominicans, the Jesuits and the Minims. She placed great confidence in these three orders and warmly recommended them to the pope (a delicate matter, since Sixtus V was a Franciscan). The Dominicans were well known for their reforming zeal, personified in the figure of Pope Pius V, elected to the See of Peter in 1566, the year of de' Pazzi's birth. The Carmelite addressed the first of her letters to the archbishop's Dominican confessor, Fr. Angelo Pientini. The Minims were distinguished for their austerity and poverty, and, although they had been founded by St. Francis de Paola in 1435, they had come to Florence only three years before Mary Magdalen dictated her letters. The Jesuits were the newest order of the three, and closely associated with the Tridentine renewal. Mary Magdalen addressed a letter to the rector of the Jesuit community, and a second - her longest and most personal epistle - to Fr. Pietro Blanca, who had been her confessor before she entered the monastery. (It seems the Carmelite novice was aware of tensions between the Jesuits and Dominicans: in her letter to Fr. Pietro she urges them to put these disagreements aside for the sake of the important work of renewal.)

Finally, she wrote to two women who would later be canonized: the Dominican Catherine di Ricci and the Cistercian Veronica da Cortona. To them, as to the representatives of the religious orders of men, she writes of her grief that so many religious are not faithful to their vows. She also speaks of the place of contemplatives in the renewal of the Church: their prayer is a fire which should spread from the monastery to enflame cold hearts; they are like lions who by their courage and fidelity support the throne of the Church on which Christ, the new Solomon reigns; they are doves who leave the ark, not to see if the floodwaters have subsided, but to help make them subside and so bring souls back to Christ.

The twelve letters of Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi on the renovation of the Church combined spiritual ardor and prudent reserve. Her recipients were carefully chosen, both for their sympathy with the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.



cause of renewal and for their ability to further that cause in practical ways. What impact did the letters have? Apparently, none at all. It seems likely that some, perhaps most, of the letters never left the monastery. We know that Catherine di Ricci received hers, because she sent a rather guarded response. Mary Magdalen suspected that her first letter to the archbishop did not reach him, which prompted her to write two more. While some scholars believe that the only letters delivered were those to Catherine di Ricci, Bruno Secondin speculates that it is likely that those addressed to the Dominicans, Jesuits and Minims were sent; certainly it is plausible that Mary Magdalen's letter to her former spiritual director would have been passed on.

It is generally agreed that the letters to the pope, the college of cardinals, and the Archbishop of Florence were not released from the monastery. Competent theologians had assured the sisters that Mary Magdalen's remarkable experiences were authentic, but these occurrences remained "in house". This twenty-year-old novice did not enjoy the prestige of a Catherine of Siena, or a Catherine di Ricci for that matter, and the leadership of the community probably sensed that such letters addressed to the most eminent figures in the Church might create a stir. The prelates could consider their author a latter-day Catherine of Siena ... or a latter-day Savonarola. The caution endured: although many of the religious experiences of Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi became known soon after her death, the letters on the renovation of the Church were not published until 1884.

There is an interesting epilogue to the summer revelations of 1586. The archbishop did visit the convent at the end of September, not in response to Mary Magdalen's entreaties, but for the canonical election of a prioress. Naturally, she hoped to see him, but her superiors judged it prudent that they not meet. The morning of the election, Mary Magdalen went into an ecstasy after receiving Holy Communion and remained immobile (and immovable!) for eleven hours. This happened at the place where the cardinal had to enter the convent, so they met and she spoke to him about the urgent need for renewal in the Church. He was sufficiently impressed to ask to see her again after the election. In their conversation he agreed with her about the necessity of renewal and shared with her some of the obstacles in carrying out the needed reforms. And that, it seems, is where Mary Magdalen's initiative for the renovation of the Church ended.

If we recall the primacy this saint gives to interior conversion over exterior accomplishment, however, we realize that we have only scratched the surface of what Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi can teach us

about true, lasting renewal. Here is how one author recently evaluated the result of her work for the renewal of the Church:

Mary Magdalen does not enjoy the success of St. Catherine of Siena ... her efforts seem, instead, fated to remain confined in a kind of desert, muffled by a silence which dreadfully surrounds the saint. It is the mystery of the Cross! Mary Magdalen does not shirk the duty entrusted to her by God, because the same reform of the Church which had been desired for years and manifested in the fervor following the Council of Trent is being carried out in the depths of her being.<sup>14</sup>

What appeared to be an oasis in the desert of Mary Magdalen's desolation had turned out to be a mirage. The failure of her efforts, although they had been inspired by God, added to her suffering but confirmed her in her Carmelite vocation. In the words of Bruno Secondin, "If the '*sequela Christi*', the carrying of Him in one's own hands, the act of stripping oneself 'naked' with Him is the duty of the religious soul, it is all the more the obligation of a Carmelite".<sup>15</sup> In her Dark Night Mary Magdalen recognized that human initiatives for the renewal of the Church could bear fruit only if they grew out of a profound conversion produced by the sacrificial love of Christ. Participation in His humiliation would do more to renew the Church than the successes achieved by implemented decrees and external reorganization.

## II. RENEWAL: THE DOCTRINE OF MARY MAGDALEN DE' PAZZI

The "rapture" which prompted Mary Magdalen's letters ends with these words: "Our God is great and His ways are unsearchable; His works are lovable and hidden. The work of God is a profound abyss".<sup>16</sup> The renewal of the Church is one such work, and the Carmelite recognized that the effect of the divine touch would not always be immediately apparent. Some of her experiences refer to the hidden quality of God's action. For example, at the end of the visions entitled *I Colloqui* (Christmas 1584 – Ascensiontide 1585) she is asked to choose between two pillars: the first is resplendent on the outside, but within is full of vile things; the other is ugly and battered on the

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<sup>14</sup> NICOLA GORI, *Maria Maddalena de'Pazzi: L'impazienza dell'Amore di Dio*, Edizioni San Paolo, Milan 2003, p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> SECONDIN, *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi: esperienza e dottrina*, p. 400.

<sup>16</sup> VALLAINC, *Tutte le Opere... Renovazione*, p. 53.

outside, but beautiful within. The second is Jesus, adorned with the marks of His Passion, but beneath this distressing appearance is found the Son of God.

The Church participates in this external humiliation and internal glorification. The experiences related in *I Colloqui* were followed by an eight-day rapture beginning at Pentecost. At the conclusion of these visions Mary Magdalen sees two brides: the first, adorned by the Divine Bridegroom with a vast array of festal garments and jewels, is escorted into the heavenly court; the second is naked, and not only does she not enter paradise, but will not even dare to raise her eyes and see it. The saint is urged to choose the latter bride. She does so, and she is plunged into “the Lions’ Den” of five-years’ testing. Of this period of extreme trial, Secondin writes:

She had to pass through this process of immersion into her own nothingness, her own “*nihilo*”, her own “non-being” and “non-willing” in order to reach the burning love of unifying and transforming participation which feeds Trinitarian life. This testing was advantageous not only to Maddalena but to the entire Church.<sup>17</sup>

This theme of “non-being” is central to what St. Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi has to teach us about the true renewal of the Church, but it is a subject which meets with resistance in an era such as ours which exalts autonomy. What she teaches is nothing other than the Gospel imperative to take up our cross each day and follow Christ. It was in response to this call that Mary Magdalen embraced her Carmelite vocation, and it was this reality which inspired her remarkable religious experiences.

The ecstasies of Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi were dramatic, and are highlighted in artistic depictions of the saint. However, we should recall that, for all their intensity, they took place within a relatively short space of time. Mary Magdalen was a Carmelite for twenty-five years, but her visions occurred during a period of just over five years; throughout the subsequent seventeen years of her religious life she had no such dramatic experiences. Claudio Catena observes that there were 80 sisters in the convent when Mary Magdalen entered, and that a further 62 joined during her lifetime; but of these 142 sisters only about 15 were privy to the nature of her experiences.<sup>18</sup> The rest of

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<sup>17</sup> SECONDIN, *Santa Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi: esperienza e dottrina*, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> CLAUDIO CATENA, *S. Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi carmelitana: orientamenti spirituali e ambiente in cui visse*, Institutum Carmelitanum, Rome 1966, p. 49.

the community heard rumors of exceptional experiences, but their primary impression of Mary Magdalen was that she endured a great deal of suffering.

Mary Magdalen had joined an austere religious order, and she added privations to those called for by the Rule. For many years she lived on bread and water and slept for only a few hours a night. In addition, she experienced the severe spiritual “probation” from 1585 to 1590. In 1595, she begged the Lord for the grace “to suffer naked with the naked Christ” and this gift was given to her finally in 1604: the final three years of her life were spent in intense suffering and desolation. Throughout her religious life she contributed to the life of her community to the extent she was able and kept up a correspondence with family and friends. The noted historian of the Carmelite Order, Joachim Smet, observes, “When she inquires about her nephew Paul, who she heard was ailing, when she asks Geri [her brother] to send her a bit of nutmeg, the misty image of the exalted mystic comes into sharper focus”.<sup>19</sup> Amid the daily duties of religious life, Mary Magdalen sought a greater and greater self-denial, because she understood this to be the way of discipleship and the means for true renewal of the Church.

Her desire to dispossess herself completely may strike many as harsh or even pathological, but in fact she was seeking to imitate the *kenosis* of Christ. This term is associated with the hymn cited in Philippians 2:6-11, which speaks of Christ “emptying Himself,” taking the form of a slave and accepting death on the cross. The concept has inspired a great deal of biblical and theological exploration over the centuries.<sup>20</sup> St. Mary Magdalen was no theologian; she simply sought to follow the advice given by St. Paul when he quoted this hymn: “Have this mind which was in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 2:5) She did this in a way which was shaped by liturgical and biblical texts she heard daily. In our own day, Jean Corbon’s reflections on the Church’s liturgical life offer a fruitful approach to the writings of St. Mary Magdalen. Here is his comprehensive description of “kenosis”:

The noun is derived from the verb ‘he emptied himself’ or ‘annihilated himself’ that is used in this passage [Phil 2:7]. The Son remains God

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<sup>19</sup> JOACHIM SMET, *The Carmelites: A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, Volume II: *The Post-Tridentine Period*, Carmelite Spiritual Center, Darien, IL 1976, p. 220.

<sup>20</sup> A useful survey of contemporary theological reflection on the theme of kenosis is LUCIEN RICHARD, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God*, Paulist Press, New York 1997.

when he becomes incarnate but he divests himself of his glory to the point of being 'unrecognizable' (See Is 53:2-3). Kenosis is the properly divine way of loving: he became a human being without reservation and without calling for recognition or compelling it. Kenosis refers first to the self-emptying of the Word in the incarnation but this is completed in the self-emptying of the Spirit in the Church, while it also reveals the self-emptying of the living God in creation. The mystery of the covenant stands under the sign of kenosis, for the more far-reaching the covenant, the more complete the union. Our divinization comes through the meeting of the kenosis of God with the kenosis of the human being; the fundamental requirement of the Gospel can therefore be stated as follows: we shall be one with Christ to the extent that we 'lose' ourselves for him.<sup>21</sup>

Through her own meditation on the kenosis of Christ Mary Magdalen was led into a profound experience of the Trinity. Since the mystery of the Trinity is the foundation of the Church, her experiences of the Trinitarian kenosis offer important lessons for the renewal of the Church.

#### a) *The Passion of Christ*

In the late Middle Ages the West experienced a "rediscovery" of the humanity of Christ. Many factors contributed to this emphasis: the popularity of various forms of meditation on the life of Jesus, the artistic revolution inaugurated by Giotto and the blossoming of Renaissance humanism all played a part in this development. Mary Magdalen's native Florence was one of the centers of these movements, and the instruction in forms of meditation which she received from the Jesuits helped shape her religious experiences. The associations of the Order of Mt. Carmel with the Holy Land further fueled reflection on the events in the life of Jesus. The formula for receiving the habit at Santa Maria degli Angeli used during the saint's lifetime illustrates several aspects of this spirituality:

Receive this tunic which symbolizes the most bitter suffering endured by Jesus Christ on the cross and the sorrow which filled the soul of the Virgin Mary. The nails which pierced the flesh, nerves and bones of her Son penetrated the heart of the glorious Virgin; may you always carry in your heart the suffering of Jesus Christ and His most holy Mother.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> JEAN CORBON, *The Wellspring of Worship*, Paulist Press, New York, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> The Latin text, dated 1564, is given in CATENA, *S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi carmelitana*, p. 98.

The young Carmelite followed this directive, and many of her visions dwell on the Passion of Christ. On three separate occasions she underwent lengthy sequences in which she accompanied Jesus through the final hours of His earthly life and re-enacted His Passion. She also received the stigmata and the crown of thorns in a painful (though invisible) way.

Two recurring themes in her visions are the wounds and the blood of Christ. The raptures of Mary Magdalen often present a kaleidoscopic array of images: the five wounds are furnaces, rooms, or caverns; the wound in the side is a hiding place or a nest, and it contains a thousand sacraments. The blood of Christ is central to Mary Magdalen's experiences. On the feast of the Annunciation, 1585, she had a vision in which St. Augustine inscribed in her heart: "The Word became flesh", writing "The Word" in letters of gold to signify Christ's divinity, and the rest of the phrase in red, to indicate His humanity and His blood. About a month later she asked him to add the words "the blood of union" to the inscription.

There is a dynamism to her meditations; for example, she makes a journey into an ever-deepening union with God by moving from wound to wound, receiving new graces from each one. In these journeys the blood of Christ is a fountain of purification and mercy, as she explains in an early *Colloquy*:

I mean this (she said), that first the blood in the left foot reduced /the soul/ to nothing, and the soul acquired the knowledge of itself. In the right foot the blood purified, and the soul was strengthened. In the left hand the blood enlightened, and the soul acquired the knowledge of God. In the right hand the blood illumined, and the soul was built up in charity. The side nourished; and the soul was transformed in the blood, so that it afterwards did not understand anything but blood, it did not see anything but blood, it did not relish anything but blood, it did not feel anything but blood, it did not think of anything but blood, it did not speak and it could not think of anything but blood. And everything that it did submerged it and deepened it in that blood, so that the soul, transformed in this way in the blood of Jesus, had become, so to speak, another Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi was moved emotionally by the sufferings of Christ, but what is remarkable is the theological insight expressed in her visions. She sees the *kenosis* of Christ as rooted in

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<sup>23</sup> Fifth *Colloquy* as translated by GABRIEL PAUSBACK, *The Complete Works of Saint Mary Magdalen de'Pazzi, Carmelite and Mystic (1566-1607)*, Volume II: "The Colloquies", I, Carmelite Fathers, Westmont, IL 1973, p. 48.

the mystery of the Trinity. In the words of Catena, “The passion, in this vision, begins in the bosom of the Father and always has its anticipated conclusion in the Father’s bosom. The Word present in the Father is a redeeming Word who accomplishes the mystery of the passion and the sprinkling of blood”.<sup>24</sup>

The cross as a revelation of the Trinity is a perennial part of the Christian Tradition, and at the time of Mary Magdalen it was frequently depicted in the *Throne of Mercy*, which showed God the Father holding up His crucified or dead Son, with the Holy Spirit hovering between them. The *Throne of Mercy*, together with a painting of the *Pietà*, were favorite devotional images for Mary Magdalen. Theologians in our day, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, have explored the profound relationship between the *kenosis* of Christ and the Trinity. We will return to this theme when examining what Mary Magdalen says about the Trinity, but for now we can attend to the words of this modern theologian, which resonate with the insights of St. Mary Magdalen:

In the Passion, the Father’s loving countenance can disappear behind the hard facts of what must be: now, more than ever, this is very much a part of the Trinity’s eternal, salvific plan laid before him [Jesus] by the Spirit, the witness of the mutual will of the Father and the Son. It is as if the Spirit, now embodied in the form of a rule, says to them both: This is what you have from all eternity, this is what, from all eternity, we have determined.<sup>25</sup>

For Mary Magdalen, according to Secondin, the Son’s *kenosis* proclaims His true greatness: “In this embrace of the Passion of the Word sent by the Father and the Spirit richness comes about through spoliation, freedom through obedience, power and dominion through oppression”.<sup>26</sup>

#### b) *The Incarnation*

Traditionally the Church has interpreted the “self-emptying” of the Son on the cross to be rooted in the mystery of the pre-existent Word humbling Himself to embrace the status of a creature. St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi affirms that the Word would have become incarnate even if there had been no Fall, because God always intended

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<sup>24</sup> CATENA, *S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi carmelitana*, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama III: Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, tr. Graham Harrison, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1992, p. 188.

<sup>26</sup> SECONDIN, *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi: esperienza e dottrina* p. 320.



to share His divine life with us. In the aftermath of that primeval revolt there is need of “a new counsel of greater love” through which the Triune God desires to re-create us, and this counsel unites Incarnation and Redemption in such a way that the humanity of the Son is necessary to salvation:

This divinity rests itself upon the humanity, working our salvation with it, because if Jesus had not become Man He would not have been able to suffer; and if He had not also been God He would not have been able to save us; and so His divinity depended upon His humanity, and in this way the work of our redemption was accomplished.<sup>27</sup>

The humanity of Christ becomes the bridge between the Father and ourselves. For Mary Magdalen this humanity, most vividly symbolized by the Passion and the blood of Christ, is both the means by which the Father bestows divine life upon us and the way that leads us to Him. Incarnation and Passion are inextricably combined. Meditating on the scene in which Pilate presents the humiliated Christ to the crowd, Mary Magdalen exclaims: “Behold that Man who has made Man God!”<sup>28</sup> Jean Corbon sees in the Incarnate Christ the twofold thirst of God for us and our thirst for God: “It was to be the meeting point of two loves and the focus of their covenant; the place where two piercing nostalgias met, but also the source of their satisfaction”.<sup>29</sup> Our imitation of Christ’s kenosis expresses our thirst for God, and is the path of personal holiness and ecclesial renewal. But before considering that path, we must see how St. Mary Magdalen traces God’s desire for us into the very heart of the Trinity.

### c) *Trinity*

In our own day, several theologians have explored the “kenotic” reality of Trinitarian love, and their insights find an echo in the visions of Mary Magdalen de’ Pazzi. These words of Hans Urs von Balthasar could be a summary of her visions, many of which she experienced after receiving Holy Communion:

All the contingent ‘abasements’ of God in the economy of salvation are forever included and outstripped in the eternal event of Love. And so,

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<sup>27</sup> CLAUDIO CATENA (ed.), *Tutte le Opere ...: I Colloqui*, Parte Prima, Centro Internazionale del Libro, Florence 1961, p. 286.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 414.

<sup>29</sup> CORBON, *The Wellspring*, p. 24.

what, in the temporal economy, appears as the (most real) suffering of the Cross is only the manifestation of the (Trinitarian) Eucharist of the Son: he will be forever the slain Lamb, on the throne of the Father's glory, and his Eucharist – the Body shared out, the Blood poured forth – would never be abolished, since the Eucharist it is which most gathers all creatures into his body. What the Father has given, he will never take back.<sup>30</sup>

The many and varied visions of Mary Magdalen returned incessantly to a contemplation of the Trinitarian foundation of revelation.

Mary Magdalen had a lifelong fascination with the mystery of the Trinity. A contemporary of hers related that the first writing she tried to read as a little girl was a copy of the Athanasian Creed, a prayer which she asked to have read to her on her deathbed. In between the dawn and the sunset of her life, Mary Magdalen loved to contemplate this mystery, although she recognized that the Trinity is “co-eternal, incomprehensible, co-equal, inscrutable, and, because I do not know how else to put it, inconceivable.”<sup>31</sup> De'Pazzi was not an abstract thinker, and rarely does she contemplate the Trinity *in se*. Her visions were very concrete, and were shaped by a variety of influences, including the structure of Ignatian meditation and the liturgical and biblical texts which she heard on the occasions when she went into her raptures. It is significant how many of these experiences took place on or near the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity: she made her religious profession on Trinity Sunday in 1584, which ushered in the series of visions collected as *The Forty Days*; a year later she ended a series of visions on this feast and began her five years' experience in “the Lions' Den”, from which she emerged just a few days before the Feast of the Trinity in 1590; in 1604 she received a final ecstasy in the week between Pentecost and Trinity Sunday, before being plunged into the final three years of spiritual desolation.<sup>32</sup>

Rooted in these biblical, liturgical and spiritual sources, Mary Magdalen's theology of the Trinity approaches this mystery in terms of the drama of salvation: in His desire for us, the Father sends the

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<sup>30</sup> HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Mysterium Paschale: the Mystery of Easter*, tr. by Aidan Nichols, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2000), p. ix.

<sup>31</sup> CATENA, *Tutte le Opere...: I Colloqui*, Parte Prima, p. 275.

<sup>32</sup> The Carmelite mystics seem to have a predilection for this celebration: it was on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity that St. Teresa of Avila began her Interior Castle and St. Thérèse composed her “Act of Oblation to Divine Love”.

Holy Spirit through His Word into the soul and the body of Christ, and from there into our souls; our desire leads us through the body and soul of the Word Incarnate in the Holy Spirit and thence through the Word into the bosom of the Father. In her understanding, God's desire for us is primary, and whatever we do must be seen as a response to His totally gratuitous love:

I see you God, Word and Spirit, and I understand that you search for your creature with consummate wisdom and eternal goodness, so much that it seems that you enjoy neither glory nor pleasure except in your creature, even though it is so base. And your Spirit is the hook with which you hope to catch it.<sup>33</sup>

Her mental picture of this salvific Trinity could be a verbal description of the artistic renditions of the *Throne of Grace*: "The Father working, the Word dead in the bosom of the Father. The separate yet continually united Holy Spirit".<sup>34</sup> Paradoxically, from the dead body of Christ flow twelve channels which invigorate continuously the Church on earth. These channels embrace the mysteries in the earthly life of Christ as well as the whole panorama of sacred history, past, present and future.

Because everything is eternally present to God, Mary Magdalen pictures the whole drama of history at the same time; for example, she sees Jesus being scourged on earth and reigning gloriously in heaven simultaneously. The dead Christ is the fullest expression available to human experience of the utter acceptance of the Father's will which marks the Son's relationship to Him. This is the fundamental paradox which Balthasar explores in his *Theo-Drama*: that the union between Father and the Son is revealed above all in the Word's embrace of "wrathful alienation" in the death of the cross. Meditating on this paradox, Balthasar writes:

What is provocative in Jesus' message is that he manifests the glory of divine power in lowliness, defenselessness and self-surrender that goes to the lengths of the eucharistic Cross... This unveils a totally unexpected picture of God's internal, trinitarian defenselessness: the wisdom of God that is folly yet wiser than the wisdom of man (1 Cor 1-2). Only thus can the Son really reveal the Father... Truth is unreserved self-surrender and

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<sup>33</sup> PELAGIO VISENTIN (ed.), *Tutte le Opere di Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, Volume Quarto: *Revelatione e Intelligentie*, Centro Internazionale del Libro, Florence 1964, p. 64.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

hence the opening up of the depths of the Father. Truth is the Son's humility, which makes room for, and expresses, the whole sublimity of the Father's love.<sup>35</sup>

What is crucial to Balthasar's understanding is not only the depth of obedience the Son manifests to the Father's will, but the utter *freedom* with which He exercises that obedience. This freedom is a mirror image of the Father's own freedom, which is part of the gift of Himself in the eternal generation of the Son. Freedom is part of "everything" which the Father hands over to the Son, and which provides a space for the Son to freely respond with the total gift of Himself to the Father in return. In the eternal metaphysics of Trinitarian charity, "What the Father gives is the capacity to be a self, and so also an autonomy, but an autonomy which can be understood only as a surrender of self to the Other".<sup>36</sup> In her visions Mary Magdalen contemplates this metaphysics of charity, and asks:

O Word, what is the greater working? The Father's, in begetting, or yours, O Word, in accepting being begotten? ...O, O, O, what is this begetting other than the Father Himself? And He begets the Word, and the Word receives it: O, O, O ... but what does He receive? He receives the Word, the Word Himself. ... He receives the working of the Father, who begets this same Word.<sup>37</sup>

In his *Theo-Drama* Balthasar states simply: "... in this self-surrender, he is the whole divine essence ... He cannot be God in any other way than this 'kenosis' within the Godhead itself".<sup>38</sup> This insight opens up a helpful approach to two related and challenging themes in Mary Magdalen's teaching: "annihilation" and "purity". While we think of purity primarily in physical or moral terms, for Mary Magdalen de'Pazzi it is "the divine essence", which she frequently pictures as a fountain of pure water or milk flowing between the three Persons of the Trinity. This essence - delicate, brilliant and without any imperfection - is beyond human understanding, although God chooses to share it with us by grace to the extent that our created nature can receive it. This is why "annihilation" is necessary: not as the negation

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<sup>35</sup> BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama IV: The Action*, tr. Graham Harrison, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1994, p. 450.

<sup>36</sup> HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, *Unless You Become Like This Little Child*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1991, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup> CATENA, *Tutte le Opere...: I Colloqui*, Parte Prima, pp. 369-370.

<sup>38</sup> BALTHASAR, *Theo-Drama IV*, p. 325.

of ourselves, but so that we can become our true selves as beings-in-relation. Her awareness that partaking in the divine nature means embracing the mutual *kenosis* among the Persons of the Trinity is echoed by Jean Corbon:

To this communion with its ebb and flow, to this rhythm of love from which love overflows, no living being can draw near unless the veil of mortality is rent asunder. The human heart cannot contain this inexpressible joy as long as the last attachment to 'self' has not been severed.<sup>39</sup>

Mary Magdalen de'Pazzi embraced this path of kenosis-as-union throughout the various stages of her spiritual life, because she believed that only by this emptying of self in freedom can we attain divine union.

#### d) *St. Mary Magdalen's "Kenosis"*

In the first *Colloquy* St. John the Evangelist taught the young Carmelite that three virtues are essential: purity, humility and love. To be humble, according to the Apostle, is to abase oneself before God and others, to count oneself as nothing; if a person has this virtue, love will come of itself. In the abstract these virtues are attractive; but the life of St. Mary Magdalen shows how exacting they can be in practice. In her visions she learned that the process of deification demands an ever-deepening purification. In order to experience the birth of the Incarnate Word in the depths of one's soul one must be crucified with Christ, because this is the path which leads to true freedom. This was how Mary Magdalen understood the various trials she had to undergo.

She was aware that the only barrier to God's sharing His divine life with us is the obstacle of our own self-absorption. In his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* Pope John Paul II remarked that, "... in a certain sense we could say that *confronted with our human freedom, God decided to make himself impotent*".<sup>40</sup> So crucial is freedom to the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity that God will not overwhelm our freedom in order to bring us into a communion of love with Him. Out of love God makes Himself "impotent", and St. Mary Magdalen expressed great anguish that so many people were

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<sup>39</sup> CORBON, *The Wellspring*, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Knopf, New York 1994, p. 65.

indifferent to divine Love. Her desire to make herself “nothing” was fueled by her longing to allow maximum freedom for God to act in her life, and in this way become a channel of God’s love for a world which thirsted for God without realizing it.

The form of her visions expresses this yearning for humility. First of all, she relies on “guides” to lead her through these experiences. Various saints, angels, even the Persons of the Trinity take the initiative and she allows herself to be led by them. She takes on the persona of these figures, and in a sense loses herself in the visions. Her vocation in these raptures is to “embody” others, especially the Word Himself: by speech and gesture she makes Him present. Armando Maggi has explored this aspect of Mary Magdalen’s mystical experiences, and he notes that the very frustration the saint experienced furthered her union with God:

Indeed, Maria Maddalena’s concept of love is rooted in her awareness of being incapable of giving the Word a voice. ‘Perfect purity,’ the quality that, according to the Father (*Colloquio* 48), is necessary to converse with the Trinity, stems from a ‘perfect’ failure. The mystic knows that she may become pure only if she succeeds in embodying her own ‘baseness,’ as she says in several monologues.<sup>41</sup>

As dramatic as these ecstasies were, the real crucible for the Carmelite was the desolation which she embraced, above all in her five years’ “Probation” and the *nudo patire* of the final years of her life. Even our generous impulses are tainted with self-love, and purification is a lengthy and difficult process. In her *Revelatione e Intelligentie* (the eight days of raptures before entering “the Lions’ Den”) Mary Magdalen describes a kind of ladder of love whose final rung she describes as “dead love”. What distinguishes this highest degree of love is that it is so completely centered on the Other that it takes no account of anything, even the pleasure of loving God. All of the previous forms of love are contained in this “dead love”, but it is necessary to persevere in this emptiness (which she recognizes is very difficult) because only in this way can we truly say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)

Phrases such as “transformation in Christ” and “divinization” are very appealing, but Mary Magdalen recognizes the price such realities

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<sup>41</sup> ARMANDO MAGGI, *Uttering the Word: The Mystical Performances of Maria Maddalena de’Pazzi, a Renaissance Visionary*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1998, p. 140.

exact. Just as “the dead Christ” is the icon of the Son’s total reliance on the Father, so “dead love” is the highest image of Christ in the believer. Jean Corbon speaks of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit which so deeply fuses our will with that of the Father that prayer “to” Jesus becomes prayer “of” Jesus, but he warns that this gift is costly:

For it is on the altar of the heart that this liturgy of pure faith is celebrated. The tomb is there to which our nostalgic memories of the Lord drive us and where the Spirit reveals that he has been raised up. The tomb is there in which prayer lays the always suffering body of Christ, certain that the author of life will raise it up. The tomb is there wherein the living Word descends into our hells in order to deliver us from our death. Fro the nights of our prayer are indeed the descent of the light into the depths of our darkness. Buried once and for all with Christ, in the prayer of the heart we continually experience this burial from which we rise up ever more one with him and ever more alive for the Father.<sup>42</sup>

The pattern of totally unselfish love is given by Christ and embraced by St. Mary Magdalen. She did this as a daughter of the Church, and she offers her experience and spiritual insight to the Church as the path to authentic renewal.

e) *The “Kenosis” of the Church*

Mary Magdalen’s spiritual experiences, while profoundly personal, were eminently ecclesial: what she said about the individual’s relationship to Christ she applied also to the Church as a whole. The union between them was so profound that she could say that “the soul gives birth to the Church, and the Church gives birth to the soul”.<sup>43</sup> She frequently described both the Church and the individual as the “Bride” of Christ. Throughout her life Mary Magdalen was enflamed with a desire for the renewal of the Church, and her remarkable experiences underlined the truth that such reform must be primarily spiritual and interior. In speaking of the need for the Carmelite Order to return to the simplicity of its origins, she recognized the value of exterior observance, and then goes on to say:

But we must not limit ourselves to these external observances, which are the rind, but go on to taste the marrow: that is, to serve God with that

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<sup>42</sup> CORBON, *The Wellspring*, p. 146.

<sup>43</sup> CATENA, *Tutte le Opere...: I Colloqui*, Parte Prima, p. 258.



sublime and lofty purity and integrity which so few people know or understand. We must think, speak, go, stay and work solely, solely with a pure and right intention so that God might be honored and that we might offer one another genuine charity.<sup>44</sup>

What was true for her was true for the Church: to follow Christ demanded an intense process of inner purification.

The visions of St. Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi are full of rich and varied images of the Church, most of them inspired by the Bible. The Church is a sheepfold, a garden, a vine, a ship, a sea. For example, in her thirty-sixth vision in the sequence of "Forty Days", she sees Jesus as a vine planted in the Church. The vine manifests various virtues: in heaven, glory and eternity; on earth, charity and mercy; in hell, justice and power; in the soul, purity and love. Its leaves are the Gospels, its grapes the sacraments. The imagery of her visions changes, but through them all she is pondering relationships: relationships between the Persons of the Trinity, between God and the saints, between Christ, the Church and the soul.

Two of her privileged relational images of the Church are Bride and Body of Christ. As Bride, the Church is purified by the blood of Christ. She repeatedly envisions this blood being sprinkled on all the members of the Church to bring about their sanctification. At times her imagery is particularly dramatic, as for example when she sees the Virgin Mary plunging an aspergillum into the heart of her Son and sprinkling the entire world with the blood of Christ. As the Body of Christ, the Church replicates the mysteries of Christ's life. Just as Mary Magdalen could mystically share in Christ's Passion, receive His wounds, and be given His own heart, so the Church as a whole was united to all of the events of His life, death and resurrection.

One of her most sustained mystical reflections on the renewal of the Church is *Colloquy* 43, which begins with an invitation from Christ: "Come, my bride, I want you to regenerate and renew the whole body of Holy Church with my blood, offering me all the states of creatures".<sup>45</sup> In the course of the vision, Mary Magdalen reviews various classes of people: religious, priests, the faithful, heretics, infidels, and the souls in purgatory. She offers these various groups to Christ, and offers His blood on their behalf. (This theme of offering is a very common one in her visions. In Mary Magdalen's understanding, only the ordained priest is empowered to draw Christ *from* the bosom

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<sup>44</sup> AGRESTI, *Tutte le Opere...: Probatione*, Prima Parte, p. 95.

<sup>45</sup> CATENA, *Tutte le Opere...: I Colloqui*, Parte Prima, p. 94.

of the Father in the celebration of the Eucharist, but everyone takes part in offering the sacrifice *to* the Father.)

In this and other visions, Mary Magdalen shows a lively awareness of the variety of vocations in the ecclesial Body of Christ. Their roles pertain to different aspects of the life of Christ, or to various Persons of the Trinity; her view is both all-embracing and tailored to the individual. All the members of the Church have a role to play in the great work of renewal. Her understanding of the lengths to which God would go to “identify with” each individual and seek to elicit union with that person led to one of the few instances in which the theological experts “censored” an account of her visions. In a vision on June 24, 1584 she stated that God possesses many perfections (Wisdom, Goodness, Power, and so on), and that in the case of a particular individual He relates by means of the attribute most congenial to that person; in her case, this was “unitive love”. According to the prevailing scholastic thought of the time, a direct encounter between the soul and God was impossible, so the Jesuit Fr. Cepari revised this paragraph. Without delving into the theological complexities of the question, it is noted here primarily as evidence that for St. Mary Magdalen each member of the Church has a unique role to play in the work of salvation.

As noted several times, the theme of the blood of Christ is central to Mary Magdalen’s doctrine. It is the offering of this saving blood which purifies the Church and its various members. This testifies to the divine initiative: it proclaims the thirst of God for our salvation, and the kenosis of the Word out of love for us. This total self-gift reveals the generous love of God and provides the means for us to imitate the kenosis of the Son. In the letter of renewal written to her former confessor, Mary Magdalen addresses Christ in these words:

O Bridegroom, infallible Truth, uncreated Wisdom, eternal God, ineffable Goodness, God equal and unequal, and un-coequal Equality! Equal to the Father because you are God, un-coequal because you are Man; equal to Man because you are Man, un-coequal because you are God. O un-coequal Equality, you made yourself Man to give your blood to this man. O “humanate” Word and bled Lamb, you have poured out your blood for Man, I mean for your spouse the Church. Oh, may this blood penetrate the heart of my most dear father, the minister of this blood, so that by offering it anew and being constantly nourished by it he may make its power known and understood! O, if the blood of irrational creatures offered by other creatures in the Old Testament had the power to purify and cleanse in part, how much more does this blood, not the blood of a

mere creature but of the God-Man, have the power to purify hearts and bring about such works, because only by means of this blood can such works can be accomplished!<sup>46</sup>

She goes on to describe this blood as the ladder and the way that leads to paradise.

How did Mary Magdalen climb this ladder in her contemplative vocation? She clearly recognized the cloistered life as an ecclesial vocation. She urged her sisters to see themselves as a cross planted in the garden of the Church, upon which Christ is crucified so that His blood can bring life to the other members of His Body. His blood and their tears make the garden fruitful. She saw the apostolic and contemplative ways of life mutually supportive, and urged her cloistered sisters never to lose sight of others in their desire for Christ: "When you are dwelling in the secret bridal chamber of the heart, you should glance out the window of His wounded side and call out to so many men and women who are being lost, because you ought to have an anxious and loving desire for their salvation".<sup>47</sup>

Mary Magdalen practiced what she preached. In spite of her sufferings and sickness she served the other sisters of her community with a generous spirit. For fifteen years she assisted the ill and elderly nuns, and also served for a time as novice mistress and subprioress. Even her remarkable mystical proved no obstacle to her charity. On the patronal feast of the convent (the Assumption) in 1589, she spent a good part of the day in ecstasy, but left her rapture to help serve at table. Like St. Thérèse, who centuries later lived out the maxim that "the zeal of a Carmelite should embrace the whole world", St. Mary Magdalen believed that to love Christ was to love everyone else in Christ: "O Word, I wish I could be in every place, to arrive at every place and to not be in any place, but only to reach You, to be with You and in You".<sup>48</sup> Joachim Smet emphasizes that it is this charity, not her mystical experiences, which is central to her message for us:

But if Sister Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi was canonized, it was not for her ecstasies, but for the perfection of love, manifested in fidelity to daily duty and sincere dedication to the needs of others. As in her girlhood,

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<sup>46</sup> VALLAINC, *Tutte le Opere...: Renovazione della Chiesa*, p. 86. "Humanate" is a neologism of St. Mary Magdalen.

<sup>47</sup> AGRESTI, *Tutte le Opere...: Probatione*, Prima Parte, p. 259.

<sup>48</sup> CATENA, *Tutte le Opere...: I Colloqui*, Parte Prima, p. 630.

she liked to help with the household chores. She rose early to light the fire in the kitchen or laundry and spent hours cooking and washing. She was devoted to the aged and infirm; she would have dearly loved to be infirmarian.<sup>49</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Considering this sixteenth-century mystic from a twentieth-century perspective, Claudio Catena made a plea: “The saint should be shown to us as she really was: a woman who for a short period of time was a reluctant ecstatic, but who throughout her life was aflame with love for the Church”.<sup>50</sup> He recognizes that she had remarkable experiences, a trait which she shares with other spiritual figures such as St. Teresa of Avila and St. John Bosco, but he maintains that she was “a very normal saint”.<sup>51</sup> The obstacle, of course, is that for most of us “normal saint” seems to be an oxymoron. This is because we so easily confuse “normal” with “widespread”, and the saints challenge us to see that “normal” should mean human nature as God intends it: generous, self-sacrificing and loving.

The paradigm of true humanity in any age is Jesus Himself, freely obedient unto death, and the fact that the saints who imitate Him both fascinate and discomfort us is an indication of how easily we debase the currency of what is “normal” humanity. It is fashionable in some circles to dismiss as passé the “baroque” expressions associated with saints like Mary Magdalen, although the fascination that a figure like Padre Pio exercises in our time suggests that the new millennium is not exempt from a taste for the mystical.

What is ironic is not that the saints attract our attention, but that they do so for the wrong reasons - we miss the interior transformation because we are distracted by the exterior manifestations. This dynamic is clear in the life of St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi: she sought to be “nothing”, to imitate the kenosis of Christ - and in the process attracted notoriety. In her thirst for renewal, she had exhorted her sisters to not be content with the rind of external observance, but to savor the marrow of interior self-denial. The caution applies to her life

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<sup>49</sup> SMET, *The Carmelites: A History of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, Volume II: *The Post-Tridentine Period*, p. 220.

<sup>50</sup> CATENA, *S. Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi carmelitana*, p. 128.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

as well: to learn the lesson she teaches, we must dig beneath the accounts of her raptures (colorful though these are!) and encounter the heroic woman who sought self-denial in humble service to others and the endurance of spiritual and physical sufferings.

What does she have to say to the Church at the beginning of a new millennium? Pre-occupied as we often are by the structures and forms of ecclesial life, she bears witness to the primacy of interior renewal. In the words of Bruno Secondin:

Her intuition of a Church always holy and always seeking to purify itself, which models itself on Christ and which manifests Him as His beautiful Bride and mystical Body; the structure of the Church as a reflection of the Christ's love for all humanity; the conviction that a loving life rooted in the Trinity will bear fruit; the priority given to personal renewal as the necessary precondition for any structural renovation; a reforming zeal which is born and bred from profound love. All of this is a message which is alive and valid today.<sup>52</sup>

If the Jews seek “signs” and the Greeks desire “wisdom”, we want ... “results”. In response to our thirst for external renovation St. Mary Magdalen de’Pazzi offers the testimony of a hidden life and an interior crucifixion. Together with the holy men and women of every age, she is one of those myrrh-bearing women, the “ecclesial souls” described so poetically by Jean Corbon:

The most beautiful service the Church renders to this world is to come to the tomb and to stand at the altar of the heart, not now to embalm the body of Jesus but to heal the dead who throng the earth by offering them even now the hope and pledge of the resurrection. The ‘silent love’ of prayer ‘to’ Jesus then expands into its proper space, for it gives life to the members of Jesus who are wounded by death and it is the place in his body from which love spreads. When we pray thus in the Spirit, the name of Jesus is ‘poured out’ (Sg 1:3) over his crucified body. We are then the Church in its most hidden but also most life-giving mystery: we are at the heart of the kenosis of the Spirit and the Bride.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> SECONDIN, *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi: esperienza e dottrina*, p. 378.

<sup>53</sup> CORBON, *The Wellspring*, p. 147.