

LIVING GOD'S WORD LIKE THE SAINTS

BY DANIELLE NUSSBERGER, PH.D.

PRAYING THE LITANY OF THE SAINTS AND BUILDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD



“Saint Mary Magdala, pray for us. All holy men and women, Saints of God, pray for us.” During the baptismal liturgy at the Easter Vigil, just before the water of new life in the Spirit is blessed, we sing these words as part of the Litany of the Saints. We implore the saints one by one, including the patron saints of the candidates for baptism, to pray for them and for all of us, that we might embrace the Christ who unites Himself to us through His salvific Death and Resurrection.



Pietro Perugino
The Crucifixion with the Virgin, Saint John, Saint Jerome, and Saint Mary Magdalene, detail
(c.1482/1485);

courtesy National Gallery of Art
(Washington, D.C.)



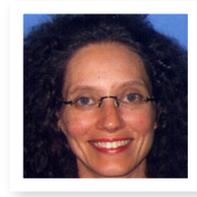
We appeal to these holy women and men, because we know that they are examples to us in heeding the apostle Paul's words, "...you too must think of yourselves as dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus" (Rom 6:11). The faith of these steadfast disciples grew out of their uniquely personal encounters with the Risen Lord and their subsequent proclamations of His Resurrection through their words and deeds that were conformed to Him.

"Saint Mary Magdala, pray for us." It is right to call upon Mary Magdala during this Easter Vigil litany, because of her primary role in witnessing to Christ's Resurrection. John's Gospel tells us of Mary's meeting with the Risen One. Weeping outside the tomb on Easter morning, she tells the two angels sitting where Jesus' body should have been, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him" (Jn 20:13). Mary's grief at the loss of Jesus' body is so acute, because she has accompanied Him all the way to the depths of Cross and tomb, thereby dying with Him, never imagining what it would mean to rise with Him. She desires to hold on to the only thing she has left, the wounded and broken body of her Lord.

When Jesus appears to her, she does not recognize Him at first. Mistaking Him for the gardener, she pleads with Him to let her know where His body has been taken. Only when Jesus speaks her name, "Mary," does she know Him and address Him as her "Rabbouni," or teacher. In her overwhelming love for Him, she clings to Him. But He commands her not to, for she cannot remain there with Him. She has another task to perform. She must go to the disciples and tell them that Jesus is going to the Father. Following Jesus' instructions, she announces to His friends, "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18). In calling Mary by name and beckoning her to move beyond the tomb, Jesus is claiming her as His own and gifting her with a new life born out of her sharing in His suffering and Death. Asking Saint Mary Magdala to pray for us, we seek to join her as cherished disciples of Christ who have followed Him to Cross and tomb through baptism and who have known Him, crucified and risen, in the breaking of the bread (cf. Lk 24:35).

Throughout our invocation of the saints, we recall their singular stories of death to sin and resurrection to life with God; we attest to the fact that our stories of death and rebirth are inextricably linked with theirs, because we are all bonded to one another in the Communion of Saints. As members of Christ's Body, we are not only called upon to proclaim His Resurrection in word. Like Mary Magdala and the other holy disciples, we are made new in Christ's image so as to be Christ for one another through actions that promote the peace and justice of God's Kingdom inaugurated by the Incarnation. We are to pattern our lives after the blessed ones whom Jesus has welcomed into His Kingdom, because they hungered and thirsted for righteousness, willing to suffer persecution for the sake of it (cf. Mt 5:6, 10).

During the Easter Vigil's exuberant celebration of the Paschal Mystery, we remember our baptisms, when Christ called us to Himself. Singing the names of our patron saints, we are identified as participants in their communion. For we are on the way to sharing in the fullness of the eschatological banquet that is theirs, as we hope to hear our Risen Lord greet us with these words: "Come you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, imprisoned and you visited me... whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:34-35, 40).



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