

The background of the page is a photograph of an ancient Egyptian tomb. At the top, there is a horizontal band of hieroglyphs. Below this, a large, dark, rectangular sarcophagus is visible, partially covered by a light-colored, draped cloth. The overall scene is dimly lit, with a focus on the textures of the stone and the fabric.

THE LIFE OF ST. MARY OF EGYPT AS AN 'ICON IN WORDS'

BY TANIA M. GEIST

The early saints of the desert evoke a level of discomfort; their stories are jarring. They invite us into a world of simplicity and starkness that seems foreign to the extreme. Perhaps the ancient desert contrasts so sharply with our world today that its saints must be rendered either entirely irrelevant in their distance or sorely necessary in the stripped-down clarity they convey.



Théodore Chassériau, *The Life of St. Mary of Egypt* (1843), detail: The holy monk Zossima buries St. Mary of Egypt with the assistance of a lion.

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St. Mary of Egypt is one of these voices from the desert, whose story is characterized by an all-or-nothing quality that demands to be either bluntly rejected or taken quite seriously. She begins as an insatiable pleasure-seeker in the city and ends a lone ascetic in the wilderness, thirsty only for Christ. But Mary's tale is much more than a simple lust-turned-to-love narrative. Indeed its nuances are worth exploring if we are truly to appreciate her as a "liturgical icon of repentance," as she is called by Sr. Benedicta Ward in *Harlots of the Desert*.¹ The ascetic's story possesses a pervasive sacramentality, for the Cross, in its various forms, punctuates its pages at almost every crucial juncture. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the Eastern Orthodox Church considers Mary's life story to be an "icon in words," reciting those words liturgically each Lent.² Here, we will trace the contours of Mary's narrative so as to contemplate and encounter more fully this icon of repentance.

The most popular Latin version of Mary's story, the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*, comes to us from Sophronius of Jerusalem, known historically as a sophist, monk, and patriarch. When Sophronius records his written version, he explains that "to keep silent about the miraculous works of God . . . is dangerous to the soul."³ And in telling of such wondrous works, Sophronius strongly emphasizes the importance of the Cross. In the following, we will attempt a fruitful reading of Mary's story by revisiting its details, focusing on the role of the Cross in Mary's journey and particularly on how Sophronius' text draws out a close connection between the Cross and miracle in her life.⁴ Understanding how the Cross is so pivotal in this story also means acknowledging the extreme importance to Mary of the Cross' sacramental embodiment, the Eucharist. Her story begins and ends with the Cross, first in relic form and then in sacramental form.

A Story of Repentance: Revisiting the Plot

"For more than seventeen years, I passed my life openly tarrying in the fires of lust. . . . What I did, I did out of insatiable desire."⁵ A young woman from Egypt was en route to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. But her reasons for making the pilgrimage were hardly holy. Her passage was a product of her hopes to be as promiscuous as possible with the young men on board. She was not a prostitute but rather a pleasure seeker.⁶ Once in Jerusalem, however, Mary of Egypt experienced a powerful conversion at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where the True Cross was exposed for veneration. After a dramatic change of heart, Mary followed what she understood to be the Mother of God's instructions and went out into the desert, where she lived the rest of her life on nothing but the Word of God and miraculously multiplying bread. She encountered no one, until one day an elderly monk named Fr. Zossima discovered her there, her skin blackened by the sun and her soul in sacred humility. She told him her life story and asked him to bring her the Divine Mysteries the next year on the night of the Lord's Supper.

At the appointed time, she arrived that following year, walking across the waters of the Jordan to reach him. Yet again she asked him to come and find her in one year, this time by the stream where they had first met. When he did, Fr. Zossima found Mary's dead body, with an inscription in the sand stating that she had died just after receiving the Mysteries he had administered to her, and that he should bury her. For this task, there appeared—seemingly from nowhere—a gentle lion, who dug the holy woman's grave for him. She had asked the monk not to relay her story to anyone until after her passing; so from that day on, Zossima spread the miraculous tale throughout the monastic community—a tale that continued to be passed down orally long after Mary's death in 522 A.D.

The True Cross: Inspiration, Forbidden Mystery, and Catalyst of Conversion

“They are all going to Jerusalem for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which is to be celebrated there in a few days’ time.’ Then I said to him, ‘Do you think they would take me, if I wanted to go with them?’”⁷ Thus begins Mary’s pilgrimage to the Holy Land—made for all of the wrong reasons, but resulting in a conversion that would change the course of her life. When Mary arrives in Jerusalem, after a lust-filled journey, she is left wanting more of the same. But then she is swept away in the celebrations’ events:

Now when the festival of the Exaltation of the Precious Cross came round, and I was going about as usual hunting for the souls of young men, I saw at first light that everyone was going to the church. So I went along, running with those who were running there and I came with them into the forecourt of the cathedral. At the hour for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross I pushed and was pushed, fighting my way fiercely through the crowd to get in.⁸

In her unholy state, and unaware of the great holiness of the place she is about to enter, Mary is denied entrance by a supernatural force.

But as soon as I reached the threshold where others were going in without difficulty, I was prevented from entering by a kind of force. . . . As soon as I set foot on the threshold of the church, it refused to admit me. It was if a detachment of soldiers stood in the way to prevent me from entering; some unexplained power repelled me and I stood again in the forecourt.⁹

This phenomenon of an invisible physical barrier is striking, and we can perhaps shed some light on its meaning by looking to the text of one of Sophronius’ homilies, given for precisely the same feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

In this homily, Sophronius speaks of the “splendor of the resurrection” and “luminous adoration of the cross” as the “trophies of salvation.” He adds that these two have “liberated us from death and from the passions”¹⁰ and then personifies them: “I dare to say, O most noble brethren, that not only do these [Mysteries] not see nor accept those who celebrate in this way, but they also distance themselves and hold them in hatred, because they live in a way unworthy of [the Mysteries] and behave in completely detestable ways.”¹¹ Following this line of thought, in Sophronius’ retelling of the *Life of St. Mary*, the Cross itself would want to keep Mary away because of the “detestable ways” she adopts. More importantly, the Cross also has the capacity to redeem those who live as she does from the passions that overcome them, bringing them into friendship with God.¹² Indeed, Mary *will* experience these graces.

Her story continues: “And only then did I begin to see why it was that I was being prevented from going in to see the life-giving wood. For a salutary understanding touched my mind and the eyes of my heart and shewed me that it was the sinfulness of my actions that prevented me from going in. So I began to weep and grieve.”¹³ Struck by the gravity of her sin, the despairing Mary longs more deeply to see the True Cross, which she already understands to be “life-giving.” At this point, the Virgin Mary comes to her aid:

And then I saw in the place where I was standing, a picture of the holy Mother of God. Gazing directly into her eyes, I said. . . . “O Lady, let the doors be opened to me so that I may adore the divine cross. I beg you, from whom Christ took flesh, to guarantee my promise, which is, that I will never again defile my flesh by immersing it in horrifying lusts. As soon as I have seen the cross of your son, holy Virgin, I will go wherever you as my mediator for salvation shall order and lead.”¹⁴

Herein lies Mary's conversion, sparked by her confrontation with the power of the divine Cross. Her words to the Virgin Mother also constitute her call to a new vocation, to live an ascetic life in the desert. Hence Mary makes another attempt to behold the Cross, and is this time successful: "So I was admitted without hindrance, and went into the holy of holies and I was found worthy to worship the mystery of the precious and life-giving Wood of the Cross."¹⁵ That she would have entered the "holy of holies" in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is significant: after encountering and vowing herself to Christ's Mother, the human temple "from whom Christ took flesh," Mary of Egypt is granted entrance into the Church depicted as the new Temple.

The True Cross was therefore the practical inspiration for the voyage that brought Mary to the Holy Land. Once in Jerusalem, it was the catalyst of her dramatic conversion. She was first drawn to it along with the crowds and then prohibited from actually beholding it by her sinful nature. Once she understood both its miraculous power and her own sinfulness, however, the Cross becomes the *true* inspiration of a very different journey. Having been moved to conversion, this time she sets out into the desert, alone, to bear her own cross of solitude and repentance.

The Sign of the Cross

Fr. Zossima also set out into the desert alone. Having already lived an ascetic life for many years, however, his journey was prompted by a monastic rule. Each year on the first Sunday of Lent, the monks of the monastery he was visiting would cross the Jordan River and go out into the desert in solitude to prepare for Easter. This Lent, after twenty days in the desert, he sees a "shadow of a human" in his peripheral vision during prayer and is startled: "At first he was troubled, thinking that he saw the appearance of a devil and he trembled. But he protected himself with the sign of the Cross, and chased away fear."¹⁶ It is Mary.¹⁷ At this point, however, to him she is but a strange, naked woman with dark skin and white hair. Thinking it an apparition, he chases after it—longing to know its identity and hoping it will reveal some great mystery to him.¹⁸

When he finally catches up with the "fugitive," as she is initially called, he begs her blessing. She insists on receiving his instead, and so their mutual humility makes for an endearingly humorous image, as both of them kneel on the ground asking the other for a blessing for "a long time." Finally, out of obedience, she obliges him and prays on his behalf, rising a cubit from the ground as she does so.¹⁹ At this, Zossima is troubled that it all might be an illusion, but Mary assuages his renewed fear: "Be assured, sir, that I am just a woman and a sinner, but protected by holy baptism.' . . . With these words, she made the sign of the Cross on her brow and eyes, lips and breast, saying, 'God deliver us, Father Zossima, from the evil one and his emissaries, for his envy of us is great.'"²⁰ Here the sign of the Cross serves both to ward away evil and to identify her, as it—along with her Baptism—solidly places Mary with Fr. Zossima and all other Christians.

During this encounter, Mary explains to Zossima her life story—as summarized above—and asks him to bring her the holy sacraments to administer to her in one year, next to the river Jordan. When the appointed time arrives, they come to the river from opposite sides, and he worries how she will reach him. But his worries are in vain: “As soon as she had made the sign of the Cross, she stepped on to the water and walking over the flowing waves she came as if walking on solid land.”²¹ Moving beyond protection from evil, the sign of the Cross here appears to empower her to perform a miracle—one of the very same miracles that Jesus himself had performed. If it is not the source of power itself, the sign of the Cross is in the very least an essential ingredient to the wondrous work, for Sophronius mentions it again when recounting her second crossing of the Jordan: “So once again she made the sign of the Cross over the Jordan and crossed over, walking on the element of water in the same way that she had when she came.”²² In reflecting on the relation between miracle and Cross in the *Life of St. Mary*, then, it seems that this event shows one of the strongest links between the two. Her prevention from entering the church to see the True Cross by some invisible force is arguably the other strongest example.

The following year, just as Fr. Zossima had sought protection through the sign of the Cross when first encountering Mary, so too does he cross himself on first sight of the lion who comes to bury her. “When he saw the lion he trembled with fear, especially because he remembered that Mary had said she had never met any animals. But protecting himself with the sign of the Cross, he believed that he would be kept from harm by the power of the One who lay there. As for the lion, it walked up to him, expressing friendliness in every movement.”²³ A juxtaposition of those two first encounters reveals a great deal about just how much Zossima’s view of Mary has changed. In his eyes, she has gone from “the fugitive” to the “Holy One.”

The gesture itself also seems to have become a link between Mary and the priest, who thinks that in making the sign of the Cross, *she* will keep him from harm. After death, she appears to take on a kind of intercessory role, and the sign of the Cross is a key to invoking that help. Of course, Zossima hardly needed to be protected from *this* lion, for he has come to provide a saintly ending for Mary’s story. Aside from his friendly and helpful nature, the lion’s departure especially smacks of eschatological peace: “The lion went off into the depths of the desert as meekly as if it were a lamb.”

From the Life-giving Cross to the Life-giving Mysteries

Just as the Cross punctuates Sophronius' account of the *Life of St. Mary* at several crucial moments, so too does the Eucharist play a consistently central role. Indeed, the two emphases are two sides of the same coin, given that the sacrifice of Jesus' Passion and Death on the Cross is memorialized and encountered in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Both Mary and Fr. Zossima's journeys into the desert are immediately preceded by their partaking in the Eucharist. For Mary this happens in Jerusalem, just after she has washed her hands and face in the "holy water" of the Jordan: "I made my communion of the most pure and life-giving Sacrament of Christ the Lord, in the Church of St. John, Forerunner and Baptist; I ate half a loaf and drank from the Jordan; all night I lay on the ground. At first light, I crossed over to the other side."²⁴ Since these events occur consequently to her conversion at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the baptismal symbolism and Eucharistic participation here are especially significant. Mary repents, sees the glory of the True Cross, is cleansed and adopted by Christ as she gains a share in both his Death and new life, and then encounters him in the gift of the Divine Mysteries. After this sacramental progression, Mary crosses the Jordan and embarks on her desert pilgrimage.

Fr. Zossima also takes the Eucharist as divine nourishment before heading out into the desert with little sustenance of his own: "On the Sunday which gave its name to the first week of Lent, the Divine Mysteries were celebrated in church as usual and everyone received the most pure and life-giving mysteries."²⁵ One telling detail is that Zossima had gone to the monastery, in the first place, in search of someone who could teach him something he did not already know. Indeed, he had considered himself to have already reached ascetic

perfection: "He was tormented by the thought that it seemed as if he had attained perfection in everything and needed no teaching from anyone."²⁶ After bringing these thoughts to another monk, he was told to leave his native land and head to the monastery by the river Jordan. Mary then functions as a model of humility and repentance to challenge his skewed notions of perfection.

Zossima also gains, through Mary, a deepened appreciation for the Divine Mysteries and for his own role as a minister of them. Her awareness of their sacredness is clear from their first meeting, when she insists he give *her* the blessing: "Father Zossima, it is proper for you to give the blessing and say the prayer, for you have the dignity of the office of a priest, and for many years you have stood at the holy table and offered the sacrifice of Christ."²⁷ To Mary, Zossima is a kind of savior, because he can bring her the gifts of Christ's own Body and Blood. This is, after all, the reason for their second meeting:

But at sunset on the most holy day of the Lord's Supper, take for me a portion of the life-giving Body and Blood in a holy vessel, worthy of such mysteries, and bring it to me on the bank of Jordan, on the inhabited side, so that when I come I may receive the life-giving gifts. Since the time when I made my communion in the church of the most blessed Forerunner before crossing the Jordan, never have I received those holy things, and so I implore you not to refuse my request: bring me the life-giving and divine mysteries at that hour when the Lord made His disciples partakers of the holy Supper.²⁸

Three times Mary calls the sacraments "life-giving." Twice she had called the True Cross "life-giving," when she was at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

In both cases of the Cross and the Mysteries, Mary's desire for heavenly sustenance parallels the strength of her sexual appetite pre-conversion. As Cyril O'Regan writes within this same issue, the saints are not perfect; rather they have "permitted grace to raise them beyond their frailties, and precisely to use these frailties for the glory of God. . . . [Regarding] the frailty characterized by what we have too much of rather than too little—we can see how if it initially obstructs, then finally it becomes the instrument of a profound relationship with God." Like St. Augustine, Mary is extreme in her passion, but the transformation and redirection of that passion pave her path to sainthood.

The relation between miracle and the Divine Mysteries is also significant. As Mary performs miraculous acts, she consistently points to the sacraments as the most important miracle of all. When she walks on water, for example, Sophronius writes: "Zossima was amazed and began to kneel, but she stopped him, calling over the water and saying, 'What are you doing, father, you who are a priest of God and carrying the holy mysteries?'"²⁹ This creates a parallel to their first encounter, when she insisted on receiving his blessing, though in that case, the miraculous behavior (her levitation) comes after she has pointed out the sacrament's greater holiness.

Mary lived seventeen years in the desert on nothing but the loaves that were given her in Jerusalem, and then herbs from the wilderness.³⁰ She was "nourished by incorruptible food," as she explains: "I cover my shoulders with the hope of my salvation. I feed upon and cover myself with the Word of God, who contains all things (Dt 8). For man does not live by bread alone (Mt 11:44) and all who have no clothing will be clothed in stone having discarded the outer covering of sins (Job 24; Zch 3:1-10; Is 61:10)."³¹ As close as this painful time has brought her to both God and her guarantor, the Virgin Mary,³² she believes she cannot rest until she partakes of the Word of God in eucharistic form.

When Zossima brings her the "life-giving gifts of the sacrament," she groans and weeps, and with her hands extended to heaven, she cries out: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation' (Lk 2:29)."³³

When the priest goes to find her in the appointed place one year later, he discovers through her message in the sand that she had died "on the self-same night as the Passion of the Lord after making her communion of the Divine and Mysterious Supper."³⁴ Zossima further clarifies that it was not only in the same night but even the same *hour* that she had passed: "He realized that as soon as she had received communion from the divine mysteries by the Jordan, in that same hour she had come to the place where at once she had passed from this world."³⁵ The Eucharist is Mary's food for the journey in both instances: just as she received Communion before heading into the desert, so too must she receive the Lord's salvation in the form of the Divine Mysteries before departing from this world. Here we can also recall her words to the Virgin Mary at the moment of her initial conversion, when she says, "As soon as I have seen the cross of your Son, holy Virgin, I will go wherever you as my mediator for salvation shall order and lead."³⁶

Conclusion

Mary of Egypt begins and ends with the Cross; she begins and ends with the Jordan. Baptism, death, new life, gift, suffering, sacrifice, divine sustenance, repentance: all of these are inextricably intertwined in Mary's story.³⁷ From the life-giving Cross in Jerusalem to the life-giving Mysteries in the desert, Mary's journey draws us into Christ's own, challenging us also to participate in the ongoing narrative of Christ's life. She shows us the power of the Cross by abandoning everything for it and working wonders that pale in comparison to it. She brings us into the desert, a seemingly barren and cruel place, where instead we are freed from all that does not matter.

And ultimately that is the point of the icon: to jar us out of the everyday reality in which we move distractedly from one idol to the next—in the choices and priorities we constantly form without God—and to bring us face to face with Christ. Mary walks on water, she levitates, but only “through him, and with him, and in him”: none of it is about her, and all of it is meager in comparison with the Divine Mysteries. “We have religious icons because the saint, in a real and genuine way, is illustrating every moment of the day, ‘It is *not about me.*’ . . . We cannot afford to have, as Christians or as Catholics, other and more idols. The icon is the shattering of all idols, and of course Christ is the greatest shatterer of all.”³⁸



NOTES

1 Benedicta Ward, SLG, “St. Mary of Egypt: The Liturgical Icon of Repentance” in *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1987), 26–56. Here 26.

2 Ibid.

3 It should be acknowledged from the start, however, that the English word “miracle” is often in the original language a word that would more closely be translated as “work” or “sign” or “marvel,” as Ward discusses in her article “Monks and Miracle.” [Benedicta Ward, SLG, “Monks and Miracle” in *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, ed. John Cavadini, Notre Dame Studies in Theology, Vol. 3 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 127–138.]

4 The idea of focusing on this relationship originally came from Sidney H. Griffith's essay “The Signs and Wonders of Orthodoxy” in *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining Truth*, ed. John Cavadini, Notre Dame Studies in Theology, Vol. 3 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 139–168. In it, Griffith argues that an important, yet often unnoticed, aspect of Cyril of Scythopolis' *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* is the role of the Cross in its miracle narratives. To Griffith, the miracle accounts given by monks in the fifth and sixth centuries serve to “heighten the significance of the church of Jerusalem as an indicator of Orthodoxy” (159). A closer look at Sophronius' recounting of the *Life of St. Mary of Egypt* may reveal the same theory to be highly applicable in his seventh century context: this was the premise of my original project. Here I attempt a more pastoral treatment of the analysis that was first inspired by Griffith.

5 Ward, “St. Mary of Egypt,” 45.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 46.

9 Ibid.

10 Antonino Gallico, ed. *Sofronio di Gerusalemme: Le Omelie* (Rome: Citta Nuova Editrice, 1991), 123. (Translation mine, as are subsequent English citations of Gallico).

11 Gallico, 124.

12 Ibid.

13 Ward, “St. Mary of Egypt,” 47.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 48.

16 Ibid., 41.

17 Fr. Zossima himself will not come to know her name until after her death, however.

18 Cf. Ward, “St. Mary of Egypt,” 41.

19 Ibid., 43.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 53.

22 Ibid., 54.

23 Ibid., 55.

24 Ibid., 49.

25 Ibid., 39.

26 Ibid., 37.

27 Ibid., 42.

28 Ibid., 51–52.

29 Ibid., 53.

30 Ibid., 50.

31 Ibid., 50–51.

32 E.g., “Often I directed the eyes of my heart to her, my guarantor, praying to her without ceasing to help me in this solitude to repentance” (Ward, 50).

33 Ward, “St. Mary of Egypt,” 53.

34 Ibid., 55.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 47.

37 The intimate connection between the Cross and new life is also seen in Sophronius’ homily for the Exaltation of the Cross, when he says that at one time, they venerated the Cross before celebrating the Resurrection, but in his day they venerated it *after* celebrating the Risen Lord (cf. Gallico 122).

38 Cyril O’Regan, Q & A session following lecture “Edith Stein and the Dark Night,” for the Saturdays with the Saints series, hosted by the Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame (22 October 2011).



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