

QUICKSCAN

- **Women Praised by Jesus**
- **Women as Disciples**
- **Mary Magdalene's Special Role**

Catechism Quiz — The Women of the Gospel

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Women Praised by Jesus

One of the most striking aspects of the gospel accounts is the role of Jesus' life and his ministry. Of course, we are aware of the unique role of Mary, Jesus' mother, in giving birth to the savior of the world. From the very beginning of our Christian tradition, Mary is the pre-eminent person in Jesus' life, and she is the supreme example of what a disciple, a true believer, should be. But the gospel is full of others who, though lesser in stature, still played important roles in New Testament accounts.

There are two very powerful examples where women are praised by Jesus for their words and actions. One is in the scene in which the woman—apparently a public prostitute—came to Jesus during his meal with the Pharisees. She knelt down, washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair (Lk 7:38ff). While the Pharisees were fit to be tied by her act and frustrated with Jesus' acceptance of her, Jesus assured her of God's forgiveness because "she has loved much." In fact, Jesus contrasted her humble action with the Pharisees who did not even offer to wash his feet, which was at the time a common courtesy toward a guest.

Then there is the widow who gave her last two copper coins to the temple and who Jesus commended to his apostles, saying, "She has given more than all those who were throwing in shekels they could easily afford" (Mk 12:41). There also is the parable of the widow, who Jesus used as an example of persistence in prayer because she refused to stop badgering the judge until he settled the situation in which she had been treated unjustly (Lk 18:2ff).

Women as Disciples

There was a very important group of women who developed a particular relationship with Jesus as his close friends and followers. They were indeed Jesus' disciples, though at the time, given the social status of women, such a title was impossible. Think of Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus. If there was one place where Jesus seemed to be at home and could relax, it was in their home (Jn 12:2ff). There was a group of women disciples, some of whom were healed and freed from evil spirits. Luke names several of the women: Joanna, wife of Chouza, Herod's steward; another named Susanna; and "many others who helped Jesus and the Twelve, out of their sustenance" (Lk 8:3ff). Luke also describes "a group of women who mourned and lamented Jesus" on his way to the cross (Lk 23:27). And John records in his gospel that "standing by the cross were his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene (Jn 19:25).

Mary Magdalene's Special Role

Of all the women mentioned in the gospel other than Jesus' own mother, the most significant is surely Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus drove out seven demons. The Church honors her with her own feast day on July 22. Mary Magdalene was right beside Jesus' mother at the Crucifixion. You wonder how much those two Marys must have loved each other!

Mary Magdalene stands out in a most special way following the death and burial of Jesus. Mark describes Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Salome, who "brought spices that they might anoint the body of Jesus" (16:1ff). What an act of love brought them to that potentially gruesome sight of Jesus' mangled body. In addition, these women were going to have to get past the temple guard to let them into the tomb. They seemed willing to take that risk. The power of love can cause people to perform the most wonderful acts of love.

But Mary's role in the Resurrection story goes much further. It is she who sees the risen savior first. Remember, as a woman, she could not be a witness in any legal affairs. Yet it is to her that Jesus appears first. The apostles could not be first because they were nowhere near the tomb, but rather huddled in the upper room. Jesus would have to go to them for them to see him. And finally, it is Mary Magdalene whom Jesus sends to the Apostles to announce the stunning news that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead. Mary Magdalene, who socially could not be a legal witness, is chosen by God to be the first to preach the news of the risen savior (Jn 20:17). The lives of all these women and so many more who are not mentioned help us understand the great respect and affection Jesus had for women, whether saint or sinner or somewhere in between.

The ministry of women has never stopped in the Church, but only grown in each century. For example, in the United States in 2005, statistics revealed that of the more than 30,000 Catholics in paid Church ministry, 80% were women (64% lay and 16% religious). It has been women who through the centuries have established and run the ministries that cared for the sick and dying, the homeless and the orphans (futurechurch.org/wicl/ministers.htm).

Truly, the gospel is lived out today just as it was by Mary Magdalene and the many other women friends of Jesus.

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