

Response to Velma Richmond's Lecture
St. Mary Magdalen Church
by Michael J. Dodds, OP
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I'm grateful to Velma for her very illuminating and informative lecture. Since Velma dealt especially with literature and art, I thought I might throw in a bit of science, just to round things out.

As Velma mentioned, St. Thomas Aquinas calls Mary Magdalen, "the apostle to the apostles." He does so in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, where he has a couple of other titles for her as well. He says:

Notice the three privileges given to Mary Magdalene. First, she had the privilege of being a prophet because she was worthy enough to see the angels, for a prophet is an intermediary between angels and the people. Secondly, she had the dignity or rank of an angel insofar as she looked upon Christ, on whom the angels desire to look. Thirdly, she had the office of an apostle; indeed, she was the apostle to the apostles (*apostolorum apostola*) insofar as it was her task to announce our Lord's resurrection to the disciples.¹

An apocryphal sermon on St. Mary Magdalen, attributed to Aquinas, uses the image of a rainbow to depict her meeting with the risen Christ. As the rays of the sun meet the water of a cloud to produce the colors of the rainbow, so the light of the risen Christ meets Mary Magdalen, clouded in the water of her tears, to produce the characteristic colors associated with her iconography—the blue of humility and the red of faith.

Reflecting on the rainbow, I thought of another Dominican who's associated with it, the fourteenth-century scholar, Theodoric of Freiberg, who made it the object of his scientific investigations. His works were explored by still another Dominican, William Wallace, who points out how Theodoric corrected Aristotle's account of the rainbow.²

Aristotle had seen the rainbow as the product of the simple reflection of sunlight from a cloud or a series of raindrops. Theodoric recognized that the more complex process of refraction was involved. Analyzing this process, he was able to account for all the colors of the rainbow and to show how the apparent unity of the rainbow is produced from the complexity and diversity of the refraction of light from individual drops of water.

Looking at the figure of Mary Magdalen in scripture, we might again consider the question of unity and diversity. Contemporary biblical scholarship recognizes the diversity of three distinct figures: the penitent sinner, the contemplative who sat at the feet of Christ in Bethany, and the witness to the resurrection. But, as Velma pointed out, an older tradition, found in the homilies of Pope Gregory the Great, sees these three in the unity of the one woman, Mary Magdalen.

Is there, perhaps, a wisdom in that older tradition which could recognize unity in diversity, which didn't atomize the aspects of discipleship (conversion, contemplation, and witness) into separate compartments or separate individuals, but saw them in the unity of the one disciple, the one preacher, Mary Magdalen? And if so, are we in touch with that wisdom? Do we, as individuals, seek to integrate all aspects of discipleship into our own lives, and do we, as a community, appreciate the diversity of gifts that are present in the unity of our Christian family?

On that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalen stood, significantly, before the empty tomb. She had recognized her own emptiness, first in the moment of her conversion as she sought the mercy of God, then in the moment of contemplation as she longed to hear the words of Jesus, and finally in that moment of sadness as she searched for the one who had been taken from her. Mary, the one who knew her emptiness, would also be the first to know the fullness of joy in the resurrected Christ and so become his first witness, announcing the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples.

We stand like her before the empty tomb, aware also of our emptiness and our need for the Lord. We are ourselves like so many raindrops--in some ways so alike, in other ways so different from one another--yet each in need of Christ's light. Touched by that light, each in our own way, we can also be Christ's witnesses and, through the unity and diversity of our life together, illumine the world with all the rich colors of the rainbow of divine love.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, chapter 20, lect. 3, no. 2519, accessed July 4, 2019, <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/John20.htm>

² See William Wallace, *The Modeling of Nature* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996, 324-34.