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Mary Magdalene, apostle of the apostles

Vatican City, 10 June 2016 – As expressly wished by the Holy Father, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has published a new decree, dated 3 June 2016, Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, by which the celebration of St. Mary Magdalene, currently obligatory memory, will be elevated in the general calendar to the level of a feast day.

Archbishop Arthur Roche, secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, explains the meaning of the decree that will enable Mary Magdalene to be "celebrated" liturgically like the rest of the apostles. "The decision is situated in the current ecclesial context, which calls upon us to reflect more deeply on the dignity of women, the new evangelisation and the greatness of the mystery of divine mercy. It was St. John Paul II who dedicated great attention not only to the importance of women in the very mission of Christ and the Church, but also, and with special emphasis, to the peculiar function of St. Mary Magdalene as the first witness of the Risen Christ and the first messenger who announced to the apostles the resurrection of the Lord. This importance remains in today's Church – as shown by the current commitment to a new evangelisation – which seeks to welcome, without distinction, men and women of any race, people, language and nation, to proclaim to them the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to accompany them on their earthly pilgrimage and to offer them the wonders of God's salvation. St. Mary Magdalene is an example of true and authentic evangelisation, that is, an evangeliser who proclaims the joyful central message of Easter."

"The Holy Father Francis has taken this decision precisely in the context of the Jubilee of Mercy to stress the importance of this women, who shows great love for Christ and was very dear to Christ, as confirmed by Rabano Mauro ("dilectrix Christi et Christo plurimum dilecta": *De vita beate Mariae magdalenae, Prologus*) and St. Anselm of Canterbury ("electa dilectrix et dilecta Electrix Dei", *Oratio a LXXIII Sanctam Mariam Magdalenam*). It is certain that the Christian tradition in the West, especially after St. Gregory the Great, identifies as the same person who poured perfume in the house of Simon the Pharisee, and the sister of Lazarus and Martha. This interpretation continued to influence the western ecclesiastical writers, Christian art and liturgical texts relating to the Saint. The Bollandists widely discussed the problem of the identification of the three women and prepared the way for the liturgical reform of the Roman Calendar. With the implementation of the reform, the texts of the Roman Missal, the Liturgy of the Hours and the Martyrologium Romanum, reference is made to Mary of Magdala. It is certain that Mary Magdalene formed part of the group of Jesus' disciples, that she followed Him to the foot of the cross and in the garden in which she found the tomb, she was the first 'testis divinae

misericordiae', as St. Gregory the Great affirmed. The Gospel of John says that Mary Magdalene wept, as she had not found the body of the Lord, and Jesus had mercy on her, allowing Himself to be recognised as the Master and transforming her tears into Paschal joy."

The archbishop took the opportunity to highlight two ideas inherent in the biblical and liturgical texts of the new feast, which may contribute to a better understanding of the current importance of a saint such as Mary Magdalene.

"On the one hand, she has the honour of being the 'prima testis' to the resurrection of the Lord, the first to see the empty tomb and the first to hear the truth of His resurrection. Christ has a special consideration and mercy for this woman, who shows her love for Him, looking for Him in the garden with anguish and suffering, with 'lacrimas humilitatis', as St. Anselm says in the aforementioned prayer. In this sense, I would like to show the difference between the two women present in the garden of Paradise, and in the garden of the Resurrection. The first disseminates death where there was life, and the second proclaims Life from a tomb, the place of death. ... Likewise, it is in the garden of resurrection that the Lord says to Mary Magdalene, 'Noli me tangere'. It is an invitation not only to Mary, but also to all the Church, to enter into an experience of faith that overcomes any materialistic appropriation or human understanding of the divine mystery. It has ecclesial importance! It is a good lesson for every disciple of Jesus: do not seek human securities and worldly honours, but faith in the Living and Risen Christ."

"Precisely since she was an eyewitness to the Risen Christ, she was also the first to testify before the apostles. She fulfils the mandate the Risen Christ gives her: 'go to my brothers and say to them ... Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her'. In this way she becomes, as is already known, an evangelist, or rather a messenger who announces the good news of the resurrection of the Lord; or, as Rabano Mauro and St. Thomas Aquinas said, 'apostolorum apostola', as she announces to the apostles what they in turn will announce to all the world. The Angelic Doctor is right to apply this term to Mary Magdalene: she is the witness to the Risen Christ and announces the message of the resurrection of the Lord, like the other apostles. Therefore it is right that the liturgical celebration of this woman should have the same level of festivity given to the apostles in the General Roman Calendar, and that the special mission of this woman be highlighted, as an example and model to every woman in the Church", concluded Archbishop Roche.
