Marie Madeleine d'Houët

A Volcanic French Woman

by

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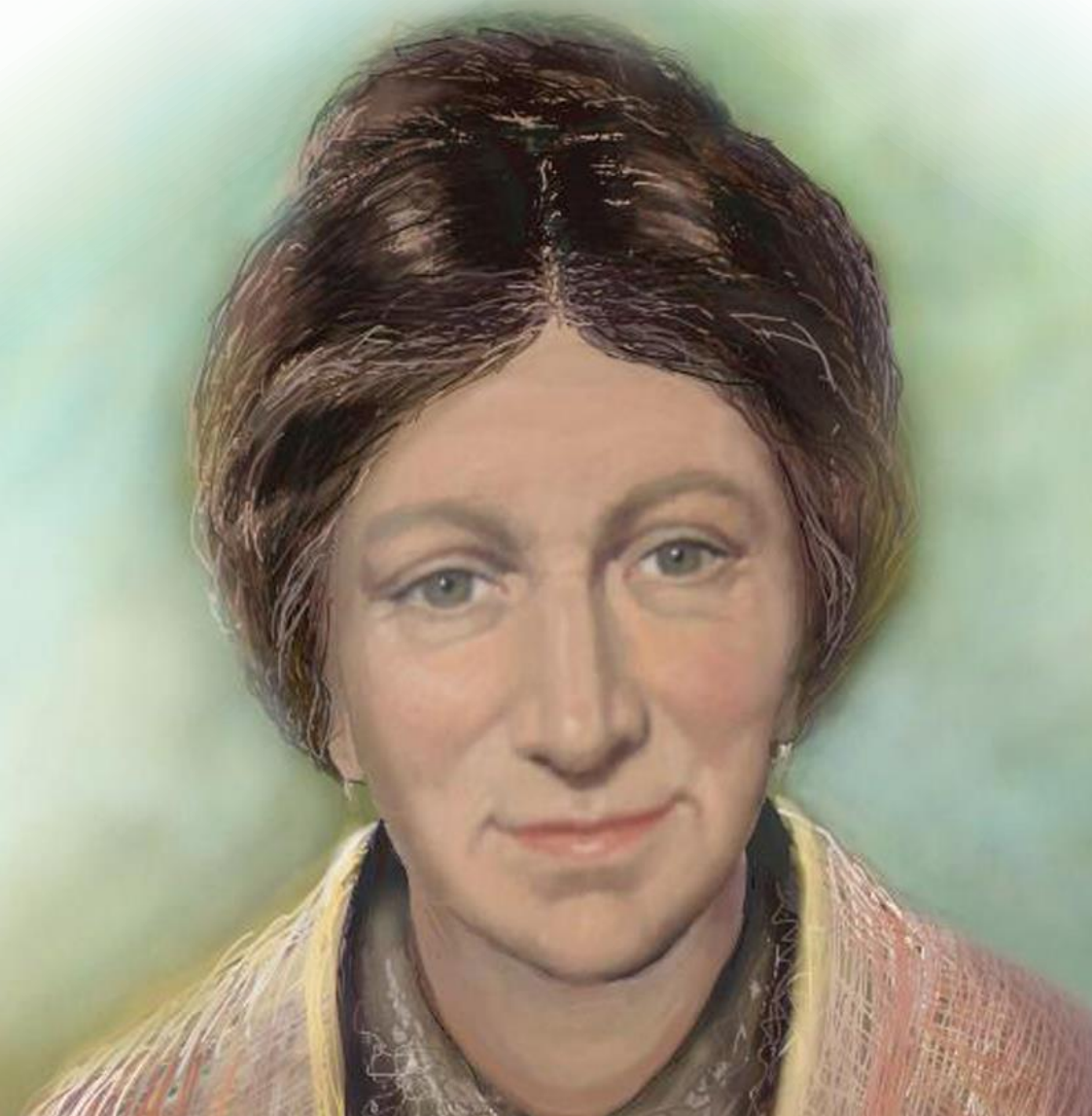

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When I was a member of the community founded by Marie Madeleine d'Houët back in the nineteen fifties, sixties, and seventies, I would never have dreamed of using the word "volcanic" about "Our Venerated Mother" as we called her then. I only had a vague notion about her life and theological approach then, summed up in catchphrases and oft repeated anecdotes. The emphasis then was on obedience and self-effacement, and yes also on serenity and gentleness, these two latter being hallmarks of her spirituality.

The word "volcanic" was used to describe her by a very frustrated French cleric, Abbé Fantini in connection with a possible foundation in Nice. He did not understand the brilliance of her vision, nor the breadth of her ideas about her newly founded community. The name of her community was the Faithful Companions of Jesus, and it was this name and its implications that made her volcanic.

Now as I re-read her life story and her Memoirs, even though no longer one of her community, I begin to get a glimpse of her genius.

I will not here recount in any great detail the story of her life. I am more interested in her thinking, which despite living in the era of both Jansenism and Gallicanism, continues to inspire. Marie Madeleine d'Houët was a woman of the Church at a time of great social and ecclesiastical turmoil. As a woman, certain roles, attitudes, and virtues were expected of her. There were boundaries she was not supposed to cross, but cross them she did, as so many women in the past history of the Church had

done. Because of the vagaries of Church History and the general invisibility of women in its records, it is unlikely that she knew much about these "volcanic" ancestors.

But there was one that she knew of, and that was the woman whose name she bore, Mary Magdalene, and this biblical woman was to be one of the central inspirations of her whole life.

A Founding Woman's Life

At her birth in Châteauroux on 21 September 1781, she was named Victoire and was to have two brothers, Claude and Philippe, as well as one sister, Angèle. Her parents were Marie and Sylvain de Bengy, members of the minor French aristocracy and staunch royalists. Victoire was eight years of age when one of the great world-changing events occurred, the French Revolution, with its aftermath of terror, disruption, church persecution and horror. For the de Bengy family, this included retreat to a country estate and the brief imprisonment of her father and uncle. It was a religious household, giving shelter to several religious fleeing the consequences of the Revolution. Victoire was taught by the Abbé Claveau, and a nun, Aunt Catherine, also lived with them. The first public religious act of her life, after her Baptism the day after her birth, was her First Communion in 1790.

There followed the rise and fall and return of Napoleon with his dreams of world empire, imprisonment of Pope Pius VII at Fontainebleau, and numerous concordats, broken and kept, which need not concern us here, except to note the extreme insecurity and distress of Victoire's growing years.

Victoire was about to assume the second name by which she was known, Madame Joseph, when she married Antoine Joseph in August 1804, thus becoming the Viscountess de Bonnault d'Houët. It was a delightfully happy but tragically short-lived marriage. Joseph died on 1 July 1805, and their son Eugène was born the following September.

The grief and joy that marked her life then were to continue throughout her life. As she laboured to carry on in her new home at Parassy some twenty kilometres from the city of Bourges, she revelled in the love of her son. Despite the eventual pattern of her life, Eugène was always part of her deepest love and concern.

Madame Joseph began to pick up the pieces of her life and her attention turned to the hundreds of displaced and wounded victims of the Napoleonic wars. She and her husband had done similar service of healing and provision for the poor and Madame Joseph soon became well known for her kindness. But, she tells us, there was always a kind of emptiness inside her, a space that as yet could not be filled.

As concordats came into effect, one of the major influences on the life of Madame Joseph occurred, and that was the return of the Jesuits and the opening of their school, St. Acheul, in Amiens in 1816. It was to St. Acheul that she brought Eugène for his schooling, and from this time on, her life was inextricably bound up with the Jesuits in ways she could not possibly have imagined. Madame Joseph moved part time to Amiens in order to be near her son and came under the influence of a succession of Jesuit confessors and directors. Among these were Fathers Varin and

Sellier who made her life a joy, and one would have to say a misery over the next five or six years. But it was in these years up to 1820 that her life project became clear and ultimately became a reality in the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus.

When Napoleon arrived in Paris in 1815, Joseph Varin SJ had to disappear in fear of his life. He found shelter with Madame Joseph at Parassy. There followed a kind of semi-monastic living which included the whole household. It was for Madame Joseph a kind of novitiate. Her prayer life developed and she began to experience some of the freedom of spirit that characterised Jesuit life. The Jansenistic influence on the religious life and spirituality in France and elsewhere will be developed on later, but Madame Joseph's life up until then, as had the lives of all her contemporaries, had been deeply marked by its stern and rigid form of Christianity. It was rooted in a particular way of seeing humanity as depraved and an all-pure God who needed to be propitiated principally by suffering and sacrifice. Even though the Jesuits were sworn enemies of the Jansenists, and even though Jansenism had been officially condemned, as happens with all heresies, it left its mark on the Church, and even on the Jesuits. But the fundamental Jesuit approach to God was more biblically based, more respectful of the human created in the image of God and more centred on a God of love rather than of punishment. And central to the Jesuit approach was the living out of their name rooted in the following of Jesus.

Madame Joseph's spiritual life blossomed in this setting, and her natural gifts of kindness and gentleness began to affect the way

she saw herself before God. She was profoundly attracted to the form of religious life practised by the Jesuits, and when, in 1816, St. Acheul opened again and she came under the more frequent influence of Joseph Varin, this conviction deepened. For the next four years, though, this conviction was continually tested, despaired of and a cause of profound bewilderment, through her dealings with Father Varin and a series of other Jesuits.

The form of spirituality that lay behind these interactions will be described later. It consisted in a conviction that God's main intervention in our lives was through suffering. The treatment of Madame Joseph by her directors looks like rather appalling cruelty to us but seems to have been interpreted by them as the way to God.

This period was a time of advance and retreat, of ridicule and humiliation, of being driven almost to the edge of sanity, of decisions made definitively only to be cancelled the following day. This makes very unpleasant reading in Marie Madeleine's Memoirs. This is the name by which she will be known henceforth, as the conviction dawns on her gradually, despite the opposition of her directors and confessors, that she is to be a Jesuit – to companion with Jesus – and to found a community of women Jesuits. This conviction was reached on the feast of the Sacred Heart, 23 June 1817, when she heard a voice from the Crucifix on the altar say, "I thirst". Her new vocation was confirmed by the inner realisation that Jesus "was the first Jesuit", and that it was the life of Jesus that she was adopting, not particularly that of the Jesuits.

Father Folloppe astonishingly gave her a copy of the Jesuit rule, and she began to adapt the parts that did not refer to the ordained Jesuits to her own purposes. A series of "revelations", or profoundly prayerful reflections began to be formulated in her heart. She asked for the gift of "his Spirit, his Heart and his Mother" of Jesus. She was given the gifts of poverty, humility, and obedience; she then asked for a fourth gift and received the gift of gentleness. And, in turning to the life of Jesus, she chose as her guides the "holy women of the Gospel", the women disciples, as she pointed out, who remained faithful to Jesus after the male apostles and disciples had abandoned Him. The outlines of her new Society were becoming clearer, and it is not an accident that the name she chose for this Society was the Faithful Companions of Jesus.

The project was never plain sailing, of course, but eventually, with Joseph Varin's blessing, was begun. He, however, could not resist the final taunt that she was finally about to do her own will. This rude remark is in line with traditional and normative official male spirituality about women's spirituality. We will explore this at greater length later. Here it is sufficient that the direct access of women to God (the standard definition of mysticism), was always suspect for women in a Church built on male clerical mediation. Women's access to God was primarily through the ministrations of the clergy. God's direct dealing with women and women's direct dealing with God was of course acknowledged, but it was seen as a very rare gift.

On Holy Thursday, 30 March 1820, the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus came to birth in the heart of Marie Madeleine. The transition to her new way of life was solidified by the death of her mother later that same year. The final heart-breaking separation occurred when she had to announce to her father that she could not return home to live with him as he expected. Till that moment, her family had little or no idea of her decision about the rest of her life.

The first establishment was formed in Amiens, with a few companions who had been with her for a while. There followed the usual ecclesiastical wrangling, familiar to most religious communities, about having a chapel on site with regular liturgical celebrations, but a chapel was blessed by Lazarist priests in August 1821.

As she reflected on her experience of hearing the 'I thirst' on the feast of the Sacred Heart in 1817, she understood this to be the call to be a missionary, and she returned to that inspirational moment again and again. It is worth noting that the notion of "missionary women" was a cause of amused ridicule to some of her Jesuit directors, as was the notion of women governing themselves. The clerics were probably not aware that they were voicing very traditional sentiments, as we shall see later. Every single enterprise by women in the long history of Christianity had been thus greeted.

It is not necessary to pursue Marie Madeleine as she lived out her companionship and missionary ideals over the next several decades. The "mission" of the Society followed a definite plan: free

schools for the poor which entailed a general basic education and particularly religious instruction. All this was new in a France where Christianity had been variously banned or minimally tolerated for decades. Some of these schools soon numbered pupils in the hundreds. There were also schools for what might be called the middle class, both day and boarding schools, and finally boarding schools for the fairly well-to-do, from whom Marie Madeleine hoped to receive vocations to her community.

Establishments were made throughout France, beginning with Châteauroux in 1823, in Switzerland, and eventually in England in Somers Town in 1830.

In 1826, Marie Madeleine with a companion was in Rome seeking the approbation of her Society. This trip was undertaken at the advice of the Archbishop of Amiens, who was a solid supporter of the community. With the Brief of Praise finally issued by Pope Leo XII, the Society could rest assured of Papal support, and from that time on, their name was secure. A second trip to Rome in 1836 – 1837, this time to Pope Gregory XVI, secured a final Brief of Approbation, despite further intense opposition from the Jesuit Generalate in Rome. The Society was now free to continue its work, which by this stage, was receiving widespread acclaim.

Because of the aforementioned opposition, whose intensity and duration are hard to understand, several houses in France and Switzerland lasted only for a brief period. The opposition seemed centred in France. When Marie Madeleine extended her missionary endeavours to England and eventually to Ireland at Laurel Hill in Limerick in 1845, it must have been a great relief for

her to receive only welcome, joy and delight in the presence and work of the sisters. After being called a heretic and a schismatic by her opponents, particularly in France, Ireland was a sweet retreat. The final house founded by Marie Madeleine was at Bruff, County Limerick in 1856. Three years after her death, the convent, boarding and day schools were opened in Newtownbarry (now Bunclody) in 1861.

Marie Madeleine founded twenty-nine convents in all during her lifetime. The very significant expansion in England and Ireland from the 1840s compensated for the inevitable closure of several French and Swiss convents, including Nantes, Châteauroux and Langres. The closure at Châteauroux must have been as heart-breaking for her as it was to the local recipients of the ministry of the Sisters. This rejection by the ecclesiastics in her own home town inevitably reminded her of the biblical account of a prophet not being accepted by his own people. Meantime elsewhere, she was being treated as a popular saint.

The strength of the ecclesiastical and perhaps Jesuit opposition to Marie Madeleine herself and to her work is quite mysterious. As a pontifical institution, the Society was directly under the Pope, not the local bishops, but her respect for the local bishops and her efforts to cooperate with them in every way, belied any opposition on her part. Marie Madeleine directed her sisters to meet all opposition with serenity and gentleness, and they did this to such effect that her opponents thought that it was a sham. On the contrary it just demonstrated what was to be recognised as the inner life of her community wherever she founded a convent.

Some opposition can be attributed to Gallicanism, that ancient French resistance to a foreign and papal power, which dated back to the Avignon papacy in the fourteenth century. Some can also be attributed to Jansenism, which, as we mentioned, was rife in France, even among some Jesuits who were the great ecclesiastic enemies of the Jansenists. This harked back to the old Augustinian teaching about original sin, predestination, and human depravity, and certainly did not allow for a "daughter of Eve" to claim explicit direction from God. And some can be attributed to the ancient Christian anthropology, from the very first century, which saw women as "intruders" in a man's world and a man's church. This anthropology denied leadership and teaching abilities to women, on the ancient theological basis from the Letter to Timothy that women were created second and sinned first (1 Tim. 2:11-15).

As we shall see later, Marie Madeleine, like modern politicians, had her own red line issues, three in particular. These were first of all the name of her Society: Faithful Companions of Jesus. On this issue she was not prepared to yield. She was following not the Jesuits, but the one the Jesuits themselves were following, Jesus the Christ. And even more specifically, she was following the Women of the Gospel, who remained faithful to Jesus during the foundational events of Christianity, when the male apostles and disciples "abandoned him and fled" (Mark 14:50).

A second red line issue for her was the unity of the Society under one Superior General. This brought another source of conflict with some bishops who wanted to separate out some houses under

their own jurisdiction. “We are pontifical”, was her response, repeating the assurances of Pope Gregory XVI. One can see that, on a human level, Marie Madeleine could not bear to be parted from any of her sisters. Her letters to them are overflowing with love and affection. One is led to expect from other examples a certain *gravitas* and aloofness from a Superior General, but none of this is present in the demeanour of Marie Madeleine. She was overwhelmed with sadness at the death of one of her sisters, and brimming with love in her relationships with them

A third red line issue was the call to mission. This arose, in part, from her experience of the inner call “I thirst” in the very early days of her struggle to found the Society. It never left her. For her this meant the ongoing and never-ending work of “saving souls” as the spiritual language of the time would have expressed it. For Marie Madeleine and her sisters, this was the work of education with children of all classes and the work of religious instruction of adults in evening classes and retreats. In a France of anti-clericalism in many forms, this work had long been neglected, and the situation was aggravated by the completely turbulent and dangerous nature of French political and social life throughout most of her life. Despite the notion of “missionary women” being ridiculed by several ecclesiastics, Marie Madeleine persisted in her conviction that, for her and her Society, this was the work of God.

Marie Madeleine’s life had been plagued by illness, and she had been at the point of death on at least two occasions, receiving the last sacraments. She suffered from asthmatic and heart

conditions, as well as an ulcerated leg, which often prevented her from walking. Her final months were of deepening weakness and pain, but also constant attempts to participate in community life. She gathered the superiors of the various houses to say goodbye and was equally open and loving with the members of the community. On Easter Monday, 5 April 1858, Marie Madeleine died. She left a heart-broken Society behind as well as friends in the Church and wider society. Her son and his wife and family as well as the other family members knew that they had lost not only a mother, grandmother, sister, but also a saint. Marie Madeleine was buried in Paris.

Spirituality of Marie Madeleine

Marie Madeleine was quite reticent about her inner life with God and also about the inner spiritual life of her community. But we have enough access to her life through her Memoirs and letters, that we can piece together some understanding of what the spiritual motivation was for this great woman, and also of what her own life with God was like. She founded her religious Society at a time when religious life was beginning to change. The old divisions between the active and contemplative communities were breaking down, partly as a result of the Ignatian tradition, but also as a result of the sheer genius and initiative of hundreds of women who set out to follow the evangelical life in a world that was expanding rapidly. France had been a centre of this development, with women like Marguerite Bourgeois heading off to be missionaries in what was to become Canada.

For Marie Madeleine, these two dimensions of the religious life were to be lived under the headings of companionship and mission. The designations active and contemplative have always been slightly inaccurate. They are two sides of a disciple's life that cannot be separated. So many saints set out on their spiritual journey intent only on the love of God. They wanted to drown themselves in the love of God, enter the wide sea of God's presence, be inextricably linked to God in an unbroken and unbreakable bond. They sought the awesome face of God and the dark nothingness of utter mystery.

And time and again, they are sent forth to find this God among God's people. Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380) entered her room

to seek God in isolation. For years she battled alone, and then in her late teens, she tells us that Jesus told her to go downstairs and eat her dinner with her family, reminding her that the love commandment has two parts: love God and love everyone else. She was probably never alone again in her very brief life, but she managed to keep a "cell of self-knowledge" within, where she could retreat.

Therese of Lisieux actually disliked other human beings. Even as a child she found others, apart from her immediate family, distracting and discouraging. She could not understand why they were not concentrating on God. Then in Carmel, she was made novice mistress, and realised that in looking after others, she discovered the face of God. And her ability to love expanded to include the missions all around the world, and the "little way" of ordinary everyday life where God was inextricably linked to us.

Marie Madeleine discovered the companionship of Jesus and in this companionship, she lived her life. She may have first learned it from the Company of Jesus, but as she lived this companionship, she felt part of the company of the women disciples who were the faithful followers and eventually the official witnesses to the foundational events of Christianity. We do not know a great deal about Marie Madeleine's biblical knowledge. We do not know how she used the scriptures in her own life. She lived at a time when women had restricted access to the riches of Scripture. But she knew enough to know that the women were faithful when the men "abandoned him and fled". She knew that

the women's companionship of Jesus did not fail. There was no break, no betrayal.

Mark tells us about these women, Mark who was not writing history, but whose Gospel is considered the most historical. At the very end of his Gospel in chapter 15, Mark, in one of the most revolutionary biblical statements for women, tells us "And there were women there." (15:40). Mark has some astonishing stories of women in his gospel, particularly the woman with the haemorrhage (5:25-34), the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-30) who caused Jesus to expand his notion of mission, and the anointing woman (14:3-9) who prophetically anointed the head of Jesus thus naming him the anointed one, the Christos. But Mark never mentions women disciples until this very final stage of his Gospel. And since he has not mentioned them before, he has to explain to us who they were. By the time Mark was writing his Gospel around the year 70 AD, these women were almost all forgotten, or diminished into the realm of repentant sinners, as Magdalene was.

So Mark tells us that there were "many women" there on Calvary, women disciples, led by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and Salome, and these women had been disciples of Jesus (they followed him) from the beginning, and that these women had come up with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. And here they were, an all-woman group of witnesses to the Crucifixion, as they later would be in the Resurrection scenes.

What Marie Madeleine knew of all this, we learn from her Memoirs, is that the women had been his companions, and that they were faithful when the men were not. These are the women who were her inspiration. So in her naming of her Society, she emphasised that the word "companion" referred to the relationship with Jesus, and the word "faithful" referred to the women. These women inscribed themselves on her religious consciousness and imagination and became the spiritual landscape of her life.

But who was Jesus for Marie Madeleine? We can never forget that she lived in a particular place and at a particular time, and was limited by the theology, church teaching and language available to her. She did not have access to a theological education, and was limited, to some extent, to the catechism, sermons and retreats, and especially, in Marie Madeleine's case, to spiritual direction. This meant that, on the one hand the women could only engage in rote repetition of what they had been told and understood, but that, on the other hand, when they spoke of God and the things of God, it was from the heart, and from conviction. And above all, it was in their actions that we can discern their spirituality. This was the case, for example, with the Eucharist. Marie Madeleine does not speak much of her own devotion to the Eucharist, but we know that she was ready to move heaven and earth, and many a Vicar General, in order to get the Eucharistic presence in each of her houses as soon as possible. The Eucharist was part of the weather of her life, as the Irish writer John McGahern would say. She could not imagine living without it.

One of the predominant expressions of Marie Madeleine's experience of Jesus was the "Cross". This word summed up the Passion and Death of Jesus, his sufferings and our necessary participation in these. "The Cross" sums up a form of religious experience where a consciousness of sin and human depravity is emphasised (a central Jansenistic teaching), but also part of mainstream Catholic teaching. The sufferings of Jesus were to be entered into by his followers, and every set-back, trial and tribulation was interpreted as a form of the Cross that we must carry. It seemed that God personally intervened at every moment to provide such crosses and our response was to accept them joyfully as God's will for us. It is not an accident that the last words of Marie Madeleine's mother to her were "The greatest joy is to suffer for God".

This form of spirituality is no longer central to our Christian lives. It can depict God as a constantly angry figure, and therefore has been named as a "toxic" form of spirituality, in that it diminishes and distorts the image of God presented to us by Jesus. With the publication of *Dei Verbum* by the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have become more rooted in a biblical spirituality that, as Jesus did, emphasises forgiveness, love, divine/human friendship, and the graced dignity of human beings, both women and men. The emphasis has shifted from the Second Creation Story of Adam and Eve, the original sin of disobedience and the expulsion from Paradise to the First Creation Story, where human beings, women and men are created in the image of God, an image which is so inextricably woven into our lives, that nothing can destroy it.

We are, then, no longer identified by sin but by grace and the *imago dei* present in all of creation. The development of creation theology has further intensified this understanding of our God and God's presence in our lives.

It needs to be added here that the emphasis on the Cross and the Passion is an important part of our spiritual heritage, and essential for those who are actually experiencing suffering. For African slaves in the United States and for Famine victims in Ireland, the sufferings of Jesus offered some way of understanding their own suffering, and a sense of companionship and hope. This is true for each of us as it undoubtedly was for Marie Madeleine. She endured enough setbacks, hostility, disappointments and illness in her life to know what suffering was all about.

In a way, Marie Madeleine was a bit like Catherine of Siena. When Catherine spoke of the teachings of Jesus, she was not speaking of the Sermon on the Mount or any parables or miracles. She was speaking of the teaching of the Passion and what we could learn from the sufferings of Jesus. Marie Madeleine does not speak much of the Gospel details about the life of Jesus, nor of his teaching, but she also speaks of what we can learn from the great love of Jesus shown in his sufferings.

Neither woman could have known of the teaching of medieval women mystics like Mechthild of Magdeburg or Julian of Norwich who, starting from the First Creation Story knew that no gaps separated us from God and that therefore no redeemer was needed to bridge that gap. Instead they saw Jesus as the

exemplar of humanity, teaching us how to live as human beings, who imaged God as he did.

Obviously, because of the extremely attractive human qualities of Marie Madeleine, she was aware of a loving God in whose image we are made. Another connection with Catherine of Siena can be made in Marie Madeleine's great gift of love and friendship to her community. She did not hesitate to express this love and friendship in her writings. Later writers on religious life warned of the dangers of particular friendships among members of the community, but Catherine of Siena emphasised the importance of particular friendships as opening a door to God's love for us. She tells us that Jesus let her know that we are commanded to love God, but that the free exchange of love between particular friends is the best kind of love. Here there is no need for a commandment.

This love of friendship was to exist in the communities of Marie Madeleine's Society. Companionship referred, of course, primarily to companionship with Jesus and with the biblical women, but it also referred to the relationships within each community. Her teaching on gentleness is ubiquitous in her writings. This is not just the female stereotype, but a deeper, more radical and biblical gentleness, that was to pervade every aspect of their lives. This gentleness was a stance before a world of terror and anger and ridicule, and in this matter, she knew of what she spoke. It was a gentleness that would constitute counter-cultural biblical witness to a world torn in pieces by hatred. To this gentleness, Marie Madeleine added serenity. This was no small demand on women

from different cultural traditions and languages, living in very insecure surroundings, that were often initially below the level of poverty. But this is what struck the visitor, whether bishop or opponent or friend. These women lived in gentleness and serenity and passed this on to their associates and students.

One of the “red line” issues for Marie Madeleine ever since she experienced the words “I thirst” was mission. Her communities were to be missionary. What did that mean? The usual language of mission was that of “saving souls”, if not exactly from hell, though that was part of it, but also from the misery of never having heard the Good News. Since the 1500s mission usually meant going to distant parts to preach to the heathens who had never heard of the Christian God. At that time there was little sense of these people having a culture and a dignity of their own. The European missionaries were accustomed to living in Christendom where culture and religion were coterminous. Within a century, this whole structure was disintegrating, with revolutions and reformations and enlightenments of many kinds. By the nineteenth century when Marie Madeleine felt the deep call to mission, it was initially experienced as a much more local call to her own country of France which was rapidly becoming not only de-Christianised, but anti-religious and anti-clerical. All the traditional ministries of Christianity had been abolished or marginalised in her lifetime.

So for Marie Madeleine the call to mission included the call to see the poor as human beings in need of food, health and education, including especially, religious education. This included the

children and their parents, but especially the children. She was not the first to hear this call; other women religious like the Daughters of Charity and the Religious of the Sacred Heart Sisters were there before her. But Marie Madeleine felt called to found a particular group of women who would be missionary in their own way. And that was the Ignatian way, a combination of inner and outer religious life that would form one unbroken whole.

Poor children were the first to be drawn in, at first a mere handful in Amiens, and eventually huge free schools with hundreds of pupils. To these were added eventually boarding schools for more fortunate students, but the intent was the same. Whether it was the urchins of the Paris streets, or the children of the Industrial Revolution in the English cities of Liverpool or Manchester, or the children lately bereft by famine in Ireland, the mission was the same. It consisted of feeding the hungry of soul and body, clothing the poor and providing some order and balance and hope into fragmented lives.

The language of social justice was not available to Marie Madeleine and her sisters, but the acts of social justice were there nevertheless. It was the aim of the Society to restore dignity and respect to their students, to treat them as if they were their own children. Beyond that it was also the aim to introduce some beauty and joy into these deprived lives. First Communions, for example, were delightful and joyous occasions, celebrating not only the mystery of Eucharist, but also giving the children and their families reasons to be grateful for God's presence in their lives.

Eventually this work of primarily educational mission was to extend to Australia, the United States and Canada, and more recently to South America, Indonesia, the Philippines and Myanmar. The motivation, the missionary call, and the post-colonial shape of the world have all altered these more recent missionary enterprises, but the original motivation of Marie Madeleine remains the same.

This drive is rooted in a thirst for inclusion within the realm of human dignity, based on the humanity of Jesus. It is rooted in the love of Jesus for the poor and marginalised. It is rooted in the inclusive call to discipleship for both women and men offered by Jesus to all. It was Mark's Syrophoenician woman who alerted Jesus to the racial narrowness of his own vision. Later companions of Jesus have learned that lesson well.

The spirituality of Marie Madeleine, though framed and lived in a different time and place, can easily be translated into our own contemporary spiritual perspective. We no longer set out to save souls from eternal damnation but from the damnation of neglect, war, violence, poverty, and greed. The tools are the same, love, respect, sensitivity and hope, all wrapped in education or health or whatever need is most pressing. The same motivation is there, God's thirst for the salvation of the people. The same creating God opens the doors of wonder and beauty and dignity. Whether it is the world of the nineteenth century or our twenty-first century world, the call is the same. Go sell, go give, go tell, go raise up, go embrace.

Conclusion

It is difficult to enter into the mind and heart of a woman who has lived in such a different place and time. The French Revolution can be but a boring history lesson for us, but Marie Madeline lived through it and all its subsequent ramifications. We have, however, her Memoirs, her writings and her letters and the spirit of this very attractive and volcanic French woman emerges from these.

When Marie Madeleine began the journey towards becoming a Faithful Companion of Jesus, she engaged in a complete reversal of values. She gradually took on the evangelical values of her companion, the human Jesus, in his totally counter-cultural life. Since her marriage, especially, she lived the life of a refined French lady, with servants and dependants to oversee and take care of. She had a household to run as well as harvests and vintages to supervise. She had a son to raise in an atmosphere of love. She could take her place in society where she was respected and admired. It was a relatively affluent life.

One particular way in which we can discern her reversal of values, and her identity with the poor, was in the way she chose to travel. As a woman founder, she had to travel widely and often, in the most insalubrious of circumstances. She and her companion travelled as poor women, paying the cheapest fares and choosing the lowest seats. She endured with serenity the ridicule and disrespect involved in this, not forgetting that she was often quite ill. It is probably impossible for us to imagine, in this age of air travel, the discomfort involved. She travelled by boat, by horse drawn barge, by stage-coach and over the Alps by horse-drawn

sleds. It was cold, dangerous, and impossibly long drawn out and exhausting.

Marie Madeleine, of course, never lost her refinement. One can see it in her face. We have what seems to be a contemporary portrayal of her. It is the face of a woman at home with herself in serenity and peace. Though it is a face marked by suffering, there is a hint of a smile in the eyes and on her lips. It is the face of a Faithful Companion of Jesus.

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We rejoice that the Risen Jesus, source of our hope, joy and energy, is present and active in us and all around us.

- *Chapter Calls 2019*