

Mary Magdalene's Touch in a Family Church

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Recently, the anthropologist Mary Douglas has pleaded for a space within the Church's pastoral life, in which women's contributions could be fully valued. Her article might appear to some as a make-do solution, because it advocates using the area which has not been claimed by the hierarchy so as to spell out a proper task for women. The misgivings of some feminists might actually be heightened even further by her last paragraph, on the caring role of women. For has this not been the age-old role pattern? Maybe it has. But as the article was printed in a special issue on the sacramental life of the Church, there is a strong case for its argument, looking at a much neglected side of the Eucharistic tradition. I wish to highlight this by reflecting on an insight of the Nigerian sister and exegete Teresa Okure, and especially on a most revealing, new definition of the Church which emerged from the African Synod (three years ago, April-May 1994), calling the Church 'the Family of God'.

In keeping with the hope that African perspectives may also inspire the Church at large—as the papal exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* expresses it—I venture to join the research on this concept. Although the papal text openly endorses this term at the outset of the third phase of the synodal process, it does not wish to advance any specific interpretation of it yet. It sees it clearly as a notion that is still to mature in the interchange between pastoral practice and reflection. With respect to the position of women in the Church, anthropological observations, in line with Douglas', may react reservedly to this new view on the Church as a family, given the male dominance in African kin- and family-structures, that might get religiously sanctioned once again. At the same time, however, others point to the central roles of fertility and motherly care, in African society, which seem to receive a new dimension by this conception of the Church as an image of God's trinitarian love. Indeed, taking my lead from the trinitarian view in the Synod's Final Message of May 1994—where the essence of the family is conceived of as the interpersonal dialogue, that takes its basic meaning from the Blessed Trinity—I wish to question if the person of Christ, within this concept of God's Family, and the emphasis on the Father—Son imagery, marginalise the role of women in the Church or perhaps rather enhance

it. What if the Christ, as the Logos who incarnated in the Lord Jesus, is no longer understood as the emanating Word, defining each being's specific location in the totality of creation—which could be seen as a male dominated perception—but rather as the dynamic centre of a dialogical process, of which the human family is the prime image? I wish to explore this within the conceptual ambit that spans these related notions of Trinity and Family, and place it in the eucharistic setting.

The term Logos obviously brings us to the gospel of John and to his emphasis on the eucharist, as the distinctive mark of all christian traditions. In fact, a line of research initiated by T. Okure seems to have some remarkable discoveries in store for us, as we reflect on the old question why John came to drop the institution story from his passion narrative, whereas he puts so much value on the eucharistic theme. It has often been argued that he did so in order to bring the washing of the feet to the fore. But Okure rightly remarks that this peculiar gesture, proper to John alone, must be given a much deeper eucharistic meaning. In a reflection on the place of women in christian worship and on the distinguishing mark of a christian community, so she argues, the remarkable parallel between the beginning of the passion narrative and its apex during the last supper must be given more theological weight. At the beginning, there is this woman washing Jesus' feet; and later on, John replaces the eucharistic scene by Jesus' dramatic imitation of that gesture!

The question why John dropped the institution story in favour of this episode is a fascinating one, and recalls a similar fact in Luke's gospel. While Luke does include the institution story, he ignores not only Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, but also the initial episode about Mary's washing and anointing the feet of Jesus. This must certainly be called remarkable, given the accepted view that the passion story came down to the evangelists from a rather firmly established source.

Not being a professional exegete myself, I consulted scholars on the current views about this omission by Luke. When I heard that the common explanation resembled the one given of John's omission of the eucharistic episode, I got more interested. Just as John, allegedly, had given ample coverage to the eucharistic message earlier in his gospel and left it out at the Last Supper—so as to avoid reduplication—Luke also had already included the scene of the washing of Jesus' feet in an earlier chapter (Lk 7,37) and had no need to repeat it. As these explanations were so similar and—I am tempted to say—so flimsy, we may take a second look at them. But before doing so, I wish to introduce one more factor that urged me to look at this cluster of concepts: the washing of the feet, the role of women in the eucharistic community and the Logos incarnate in Jesus.

Messiaen, Magdalene and the eucharist

A doubtlessly erroneous, but pious (mainly western) tradition has it, that the woman anointing Jesus' feet at Bethany was the very same Mary Magdalene who met the Lord on Easter morning in the garden. Ample research has been done on the identity of the women mentioned in these gospel stories; and on this point exegetical scholarship generally disagrees with that popular tradition. But is that to say that this tradition is meaningless in telescoping the various women that appeared near Jesus in a similar setting? Interesting, no doubt, is the role which the meeting of Jesus with that 'conflated' person of Magdalene has played in the age-old piety, even up to date.

Let us look at the grandiose organ composition *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, by the contemporary French composer O. Messiaen, in which this devout Catholic, towards the end of his life, gave a musical rendering of his profoundly theological ideas. The work meditates on the holy sacrament of the eucharist. At the heart of it, we find a sequence of seven episodes from Jesus' life, which are preceded and followed by meditations on the eucharistic mystery itself. The seven episodes, naturally, include the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, besides the scene from John's gospel about the bread from heaven. The most puzzling, however, is the seventh and longest one, in which the music culminates as it presents Jesus' meeting with Mary Magdalene on Easter morning. A recent performance of this great work on the organ of Passau (Germany) is sensibly published with a painting of that meeting between Magdalene and the Lord on its cover.

What is this episode doing in Messiaen's musical laudation of the eucharist? The composer, renowned for his lifelong dealing with Catholic themes and for his unwavering interest in the best of Catholic traditions, gives us little or no indication. Yet his is a fascinating vision, which I am eager to investigate. After a call to worship and a meditation on the divine source of life, hidden from our eyes, there is a majestic musical act of faith. Before moving on to the great mystery of the transubstantiation, followed by an expression of joy for partaking in divine life, the work summarizes the Lord's earthly life in seven parts, as mentioned. The selected episodes portray the eucharistic mystery coherently: between the incarnation and the two paschal events of death and resurrection, there is the sermon on the bread and on the life of glory which it brings; then comes the institution story. But why, we cannot help asking, does Messiaen include, as a seventh episode, that most delicately constructed description of the risen Lord's meeting with Mary Magdalene at the grave side? What is its place between the sequence of biblical scenes and the section on the transubstantiation? What is

Messiaen's view on this woman's mission to go and instruct the apostles, so that their faith may be livened? He lets the music express it, but what is its story?

We know that Messiaen extensively researched all the subjects he treated. And the mystery of the eucharist has had his life-long interest. He may even have read about such weird theories as Belser's claiming that Mary entreated Jesus to be given holy communion or Renan's vision of a deranged woman going after Jesus and embarrassing Him. French eucharistic piety contains a great number of fanciful views; but we seem to be safest, if we suppose Messiaen to have had an insight into the specific role that the gospel attributes to women in the economy of salvation. Mary is representing here a feminine role that mediates between the risen and eucharistic Lord, and the group of disciples, who have yet to come to the fullness of faith. Her mediation is to help effectuate the Lord's ascension to the Father, which at the same time fully realizes his transubstantiation and his eucharistic presence. Mary's ceasing to hold on to Jesus and going to his brothers is the act of faith, which appears as a most crucial step in the eucharistic mystery. Surely, Messiaen lets the music (and the white-throated robin) tell the story; for the theologians to do their analyses.

The reason for Luke's omission

Popular exegesis, as we saw, has tended to mix up the women in various gospel stories. Thus, Mary Magdalene was identified with the sinner and possessed woman, and with the woman washing Jesus' feet (in Lk 7,37), who in turn is believed to have been the same as Mary of Bethany and sister of Lazarus. Whether the woman of Lk 7,37 and Mary of Bethany (Jo 12,3) are the same person remains highly debatable. But Mt 26 and Mk 14 could seem to lend support to this popular view, by just speaking of 'a woman'. And various aspects of the gospel text could lead the reader on to actually believing that this is the same as Mary Magdalene.

Leaving this popular interpretation as it is, we should address the question why Luke took this episode out of the passion story, where it seems to have had a rather fixed position, with Matthew 26,13 giving it such a far reaching meaning, and with Mark 14,8 linking it to the embalming of the crucified, which Magdalene had set out for on Easter morning. Why then deliberately omit such a meaningful link? Was it because something went wrong with this story and because Luke had other themes in mind? As he is known to have been sensitive to the argument of caring for the poor, it could be argued that he was puzzled by the reply Jesus gave to Judas' objections, saying that the care of the poor should not take precedence over the embalming of his body to be

sacrificed. This argument could be a valid one, but I think that it must be placed in a wider context, still, which brings us to the views on Magdalene as presented by Okure.

Let us first notice the structural relation between Jo 19,17, the Bethany scene (Mt 26, Mk 14, Jo 12) and the story in Lk 7. Jesus at the grave side tells Mary, having come (with the women) to embalm Him, not to cling to Him or touch Him; in Bethany He lets Mary have her way, and even interprets it as an embalming of his corpse; in Luke, too, Jesus allows the woman to have her way and rebukes the pharisee for telling Him not to let the woman touch Him. Without trying to sit in judgment over the numerous efforts of explaining the differences and/or similarities between these texts, I think that exegetes could have given more thought to the role of the tactile encounter between Jesus and this woman (or rather: these women).

In semitic setting, for men to be touched by women does have a great significance. Even today, a Muslim man, after shaking hands with an unknown woman, is supposed to wash his hands. Although the gospels do not refer to ritual uncleanness, in this case of Jesus and the woman, it cannot be denied that there is something of this in the background. The touch by a woman clearly is either a danger of death (because of defilement), or a sign of death (during the embalming). Luke focuses all his attention on this aspect of the touching, whereas Matthew and Mark (and John as well) let this episode serve as a steppingstone to the betrayal by Judas, occasioned by frustration over the waste and over Jesus' conceitedness. But even these evangelists indicate that there might be more to it, which links the woman's action to the very essence of the gospel message and to the paschal event. Luke takes the episode to a different setting, but it seems to me that he thereby succeeds in illuminating its deep meaning. He places it amidst a number of texts speaking of mental and bodily healing, which effects especially women having come to Jesus; and the discussion following the pharisee's reproof of this contact with the woman entails a most curious redefinition of the social etiquette. Various authors have pointed out that Jesus' rebuttal of Simon contains a number of oddities, the most serious of which is the claim that no water was offered for his feet. Whereas the kiss of welcome was not a general Jewish custom, the offering of water was. And it would have given great annoyance, if it were in fact omitted.

The story is very dramatic. It flies directly in the face of the common rules of behaviour. Simon is right in feeling embarrassed by Jesus' woman friend showing this extraordinary affection at his house and in presence of distinguished guests. Still, Jesus indicates that the

time has come for another type of personal relationship. Washing the neighbour's feet and welcoming him by a kiss were symbols of a new kind of presence. The touching by the woman is the pivotal point and a symbol of the many human activities that used to be regulated and imposed, hindering human contact and creating occasions of sin, guilt, tension, possession and even of sickness and death. The exegetes who take this episode to be authentic and to represent a true event—well before the passion period—in which Jesus showed how true faith can bring forgiveness, should be given credit. But they should conceive forgiveness by faith rather in a non-judicial manner. The woman's faith was actually showing in her courage to come up to Jesus and touch Him. Christian awareness has related this to the scene at Bethany and to the embalming of his body, when Jesus Himself gives the full interpretation of the new communication, which He is to embody in the eucharistic union. After having told Simon, the Pharisee, that being touched by a woman is no longer to be outlawed and that women should be given their rightful place in human communication, Jesus interprets the anointing of his feet—by the woman at Bethany—as a symbol of accepting the paschal mystery; but in Jo 19,17 He points out to Mary Magdalene that this can only be truly redemptive for mankind if she goes to the men, who lead the community, and makes them share this faith. Only then will his mission be fulfilled and will He be united with his and their Father, precisely in and through his eucharistic presence among them. The Easter event thus will be complete, only if He can be among them, who wash and anoint the feet of each other, at the breaking the bread.

The composition of John's gospel is clear on this score. After Jesus has sent Magdalene on her mission to the disciples, He is portrayed in three remarkable appearances, which from early times have been recognized as of highly ecclesiastical significance. First the sending of the Spirit, which turns the community of believers into one of forgiveness of sin (which refers us to the forgiveness to the woman in Lk 7); secondly Jesus letting Thomas touch his wounds turns him around from unbeliever into believer; and finally the miraculous meal at the shores of Galilee, in which Peter is made to grasp what he could not understand at the washing of the feet (Jo 13,7), being invited to follow Jesus so as to play his role in the eucharistic community. Thomas's touch, evoking the sin-forgiving faith, is undoubtedly serving as a structural counterpart of Mary's touch, which preceded the paschal events, but which was suspended after the resurrection, so that she might go and introduce the disciples to this dispensation.

Thus, Jesus' meeting at the grave side, with the woman who made

that primordial gesture of taking care of the bodily wellbeing, does indeed introduce the completing episode, that leads to his transubstantiation and his eucharistic presence, in the way the French composer Messiaen has perceived it. (It is interesting to note that the Lithuanian composer Arvo Pärt, who greatly admired Messiaen for his profound musical spirituality, has recently put the story of Luke 7 to an impressively harmonious and simple score of music, for the Hilliard ensemble.)

The Eucharistic Family

If this view is correct, it has very profound consequences, which are already hinted at by T. Okure. Whether there were two (or more) women washing Jesus' feet on separate occasions, or just one, is not really at issue here. Truly important is that Luke preferred to stress another, more fundamental dimension of this event, which risked being overshadowed by the argument over the economic waste and by Judas' betrayal for reasons of greed. He focused on the basic reason for eliminating Jesus, which was his introduction of new norms for human communications, in which the feminine touch should play a central part, rather than being frowned upon.

The transubstantiation does not bring the risen Lord among his disciples as a Logos of definitions, only to be believed in and to be adhered to, because they express the divine dispensation; but rather, as the word of touch, dialogue and washing of each other's feet, or let us say: the Logos of communication and of communion. Jesus' return to the Father consists precisely in this being with his disciples in the Spirit of faith, the faith that urges them to follow the steps of Mary, washing and anointing the feet despite all harassment, and of Thomas, placing his hand in the wounds of the vilified, tortured and murdered neighbour, his Lord and his God.

The union of Jesus with his Father—in trinitarian conception—consists in the Spirit that allows the Church to be described as the Family of God. What we have to strive for, in unison, as the people of God, is not the Logos which represents some abstractly eschatological dispensation or design, commonly called the coming kingdom. But rather, the Logos' communication, the sacramental image and embodiment of which is the ecclesial family: a cell of interpersonal relationships, in which the feminine and masculine dimensions are complementary, and of equal value; not a sum of parts, but an organic unity in which touching means leading each other to that holy transubstantiated togetherness.

I have focused on the two extremes of Jo 19, 17 and Lk 7, 37, so as

to put into perspective the concept of eucharistic mothering, which T. Okure puts forward as the African view of Christian community, and which consists in following Jesus, who did to his disciples what Mary had done to Him. Between Simon, who tells Jesus that He should not let Himself be touched by that woman, and Jesus telling Mary not to touch Him, there is this double event of Bethany (Jo 12, 3) and the Upper Room (Jo 13, 5). Coming to Simon (the disciple), to wash his feet, Jesus tells him that he will grasp the meaning of this only later, that is to say, after the resurrection, when Mary has come to explain it to him. It is striking to note that John has Judas' betrayal follow this scene of Jesus' washing Peter's feet, reminding us of the way Judas' decision was linked to Mary's gesture in Jo 12, and now suggesting deeper reasons for that betrayal. Coming back to Luke's episode, we see a similarly dramatic setting, as the woman is presented at first as the epitome of sinfulness, over against Simon as the pharisaic symbol of righteousness. We seem to be entitled to say, therefore, that the sign of true discipleship and the supreme mark of evangelical love is defined by Jesus' focusing on the women. The meeting with Mary at the grave side, then, is the crucial moment for Jesus, leading Him to his return to the Father and his transubstantiation in eucharistic presence. So Magdalene's mission is much more than an embellishment.

An African woman's tone and touch.

In this light, the notion of God's Family, as the image of the trinitarian unity, is a true contribution by Africa to the world, because it shows the divine Logos not to be the law, that fixes entities in their platonic identity, but rather the process of loving communication that represents the eternally creative Spirit. Pope John Paul II has encouraged theologians to pursue this kind of research. The role of women as the essential chain in the dispensation of grace needs to be underlined, and the Pope's exhortation expresses his hope that African theology may highlight this.

Finally, the role of women in the eucharistic life can be further explored by looking at the interesting Jewish tradition about feminine mediation. We know that the targumim on Sg 4,5 compare Moses and Aaron to two breasts feeding the people, foreshadowing the Messiah. The fact that Moses as the bringer of the Torah is also identified with the bread of heaven (manna) , brings us closer to our subject. We notice that the story about the exodus through the Red Sea—which foreshadows the paschal event and the baptismal sacrament—is followed by the chapter on the heavenly bread (Ex 15 and 16); and that the text linking these two chapters is the famous hymn by Miriam and

all the women (Ex 15.20–21). It would be grossly missing the point if this role of Miriam was downgraded, as merely female dancing and singing, to accompany the great male exploits of her brothers. O.Cullmann has pointed out that the washing of the feet at the Last Supper was understood, by early Christians, to be an indication of the unity between the baptismal initiation and eucharistic union, prefigured by the Exodus events. It may be argued, then, that Magdalene's role of explaining its deeper meaning, must be seen to play a pivotal role. And restoring the liturgical act of washing and anointing, including its prophetic interpretation in which women might be playing a role as mothers of the church, could (and should urgently) be explored. Could it be suggested that Africa offers a solution to a stalemate in which the Church has been for many ages? Could the papal remarks about the Christian respect for women's position in African society give us a line of research on this score? The 'conflated' figure of Mary of Magdala may thus open new lines of interpretation and inspiration to the Church, as is shown already by that great meditation on the Holy Sacrament by Olivier Messiaen.

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- 1 Mary Douglas, Sacraments and society; an anthropologists asks, what women could be doing in the Church. In: *New Black friars*, Vol. 77 (1996) no. 899 p.28–39.
- 2 This is a slightly modified version of an article I have earlier offered for publication to the *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.
- 3 *Ecclesia in Africa*. nr. 63. We note that nos. 23–26 carry the title of the Family of God in Synodal Process, but without directly indicating how this novel notion should be read. But the text points out that the link which Vatican II established between this notion and 'People of God' must be observed. Linking Africa's contribution with Vatican II is less far-fetched as it may seem, for the Council was in fact a response to the emergence of non-western elements in the Church.
- 4 The well-known personalistic inspiration of the Pope allows us to read his scarce comments on this notion in this line.
- 5 This article may be read in line with my study on African perceptions of earthly

- reality in creational perspective. See W.Eggen 1993.
- 6 See T. Okure 1993, especially p. 171.
 - 7 I do not imply that this organ would be the most suitable for its performance, though. Others could be recommended.
 - 8 See R.Brown, 1966, II, p.992 and 1002. The idea that Jesus told Mary not to touch Him before she had joined the other disciples, because she had the revelational touch already before the passion, seems equally fantastic. Yet there is some deep meaning in this pious thought.
 - 9 Although C.Dodd does not stress this feminine role, his notion that the completion of the pascal mystery comes with the renewed presence of Jesus with his disciples certainly goes in this sense (See 1970, p.442) and could easily be known to Messiaen.
 - 10 The thesis that this confusion betrays the scripture's low esteem for women seems too spiteful. R.Karris 1989, p.697 backs the view that Lk 7.37 is a conflation, even though it needs not to be Luke's work. The important fact is that the early church already tended to give Jesus' meeting with this 'conflated' person a theological charge which we must investigate. Karris' view that Luke's main concern is with cleanness and uncleanness certainly seems to hold part of the answer. The 'Wirkungsgeschichtliche' hermeneutics, as advocated by Gadamer, tells us to take theological motives behind such a conflation seriously.
 - 11 The complicated exegetical discussion about there having been two similar incidences, or just one, which was set in a different setting for editorial reasons, is a very thorny one, which I eagerly wish to avoid. R.Brown (1966 I p.449–452) and I.Howard Marshall (1979, p.306) opt for two events and for Luke having chosen to leave out the Bethany case because it would be a reduplication. Their option pivots on the conviction that Luke's version centres around the forgiveness of sin, as indicated by the parable (Lk 7,41–43), which R.Bultmann considered to be the core of this episode. But what if this text invites us at another notion of forgiveness of sin, which does not consist in some legal remittal of debt, but in the entering into a new being, a new relationship? The tactile encounter here, I wish to argue, symbolizes that new being in a new dispensation. No doubt, to speak of a structural link across the various books seems to flout basic exegetical rules; but in a case which has clearly received much pre-textual consideration, this might just be a valid approach.
 - 12 This means that they have no need of arguing a previous meeting of Jesus with this woman, let alone some kind of enduring relationship.
 - 13 See T.Okure, 1993. Okure takes a calculated risk of calling the washing of the feet a symbol of mothering, as M.Douglas does in speaking women as caring, knowing quite well how much the serving and caring by women is up for scorn, as role enforcing subserviency.
 - 14 As has often been remarked, it is hard to see how a woman of so bad a reputation could have entered Simon's place to start with. (See C.Evans 1990, p. 361). Luke is clearly polarizing the setting, in order to show the crux of the matter, opposing the feminine care for the beloved and the masculine logic of good order.
 - 15 See E.I.A. nr.31 and 64. In keeping with his philosophical and theological inspiration, he advocates a study of the African patrology, particularly of Augustine, to whom the church owes the notion of the marital union of man and woman to be the sacramental image of the divine unity. As for the Augustinian views on marital union, see P.Lyndon Reynolds, *Marriage in the Western Church*, Leyden, 1994.
 - 16 See G. Vermes 1975, p. 143
 - 17 See O. Cullmann 19697, p. 105 ff.