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## Letter of the Superior General: Lent 2001

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*To the members of the Congregation of the Mission*

My very dear Confreres,

May the grace of Our Lord be always with you!

As the accounts of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection unfold, some fascinating characters appear on the stage. Some play major roles, like Mary the mother of Jesus, model for all believers; Pontius Pilate, a little-known governor in a remote Roman outpost, but remembered by millions in the creed for his cowardice at Jesus' trial; Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests, conspiring behind the scenes; Herod, a petty, corrupt king in a land occupied by Roman troops; Peter, James and John, who slept in the garden; and Judas, the betrayer. Others play lesser roles, like Simon the leper in whose house a woman anointed Jesus in preparation for his burial; Malchus, whose ear got cut off; the soldiers mocking Jesus; the maid questioning Peter; Barabbas, an insurrectionist and murderer; Simon the Cyrenian, father of Alexander and Rufus; the daughters of Jerusalem weeping along the way of the cross; the two thieves; the centurion; a group of women at the foot of the cross: Mary Magdalen, Mary the mother of James and Joses, the mother of the sons of Zebedee, and Salome; Nicodemus, who came by night; Joseph of Arimathea, a rich disciple; Thomas, the doubter; Cleopas and his companion who scurried dejectedly from Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus.

Today I ask you to meditate with me on just one of these, a woman often misinterpreted by history and misrepresented in art: Mary Magdalen. In the gospels, she is present at the crucifixion and is a witness to the resurrection. Let me suggest to you several thoughts about this faithful companion of the Lord.

1. Through an odd confusion of several of New Testament stories (cf. Lk 7:37), countless Christians have thought of her as a woman of loose sexual ways. Rembrandt, Caravaggio, El Greco and many others have depicted Magdalen as a penitent prostitute in tearful meditation. A five-minute search on Internet's Web Gallery of Art reveals 50 paintings of Magdalen, including a light-filled work of Georges de la Tour, currently the centerpiece of an exhibit here in Rome. But beautiful as the image of the penitent prostitute may be, one cannot verify it in the gospels. All we know of Magdalen before the passion accounts is that she, with

other women, accompanied Jesus from town to town after he had liberated her from seven demons. Whatever Mary's enslavement to evil may have been, it was surely great, since Luke (8:2) uses the number seven, representing totality, to describe it. So we might say that Magdalen had been utterly possessed. But we know her in the gospel as cured, a faithful disciple, filled with love. From being bonded to evil, she becomes Jesus' intimate friend. This radically positive change makes her an ideal Lenten figure. She moves from alienation to intimacy with the Lord. That is the basic Lenten journey. We who seek to make this same journey might ask ourselves: What are the ways in which evil still "possesses" me? What cure can I beg of the Lord?

2. In John's gospel, she — not Peter nor any of the other apostles — is the first evangelizer in the primitive Church. The Easter proclamation of this woman, from whom seven demons had been cast out (Lk 8:2), is very simple: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18).

"I have seen the Lord." This Lent I encourage you to proclaim that striking message continually. Proclaim it in preaching, teaching and catechizing. But also — what is often even more important in the Vincentian tradition — shout out Jesus' presence without words too. Proclaim it by the joy and faith that you bring into the homes of the poor. Proclaim it by the conviction and love that you show in the classroom. Proclaim it by the effective works of charity that are the authentic and indisputable sign that Jesus is alive in the world. Let the good news be visible in the warmth with which you receive the street people who enter the soup kitchen, or the AIDS patients who seek your help, or the men, women, and children who wander aimlessly into refugee camps, or the young people who come in search of direction in life. Let the words, "I have seen the Lord," radiate from you through your simplicity, your humility, your gentleness, your self-denial, your compassionate zeal.

3. John's gospel tells us that before she became a witness to the resurrection Mary had also been a witness at the cross (19:25). John teaches us, through Magdalen, that no one can share in the joy of the resurrection who has not first participated in the pain of Jesus' suffering and death. Mary's intimacy with Jesus was not just affective; she stood by him to the end, while others ran away. In fact, in the gospels Magdalen is the only constant name at the cross and the tomb. She loved the Lord so deeply that she did not shrink from his pain. She understood the cost of discipleship. So too did St. Vincent. In a letter written to Louise de Marillac sometime before 1634, he describes the cross as "the best place in this world you could be" (SV I, 152). Our Lenten journey means becoming more and more identified with the crucified Lord and sharing the pain of the many crucified peoples today. Mary Magdalen remained steadfast in solidarity with the Lord in

his dying; because of that, she was capable of seeing him in his rising. Who are the crucified people at whose side the Lord calls each of us to stand today?

4. In the post-resurrection narratives, Magdalen twice raises a question that in John's gospel every Christian is meant to ask: Where is the Lord now? “‘Tell me sir,’ she says to the supposed gardener, ‘where you have put him and I will go to get him.’” John's gospel gives two answers to this question, both of which are very important for us who live in the Vincentian tradition.

First, the Risen Lord is with the Father (13:1-3; 14:12, 28; 17:21-26). So Jesus says to Mary, “Do not hold me back. I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” We find the Risen Lord in the bosom of the Father. It is there that we must go to be united with him, seeking him day in and day out in constant prayer, especially in this Lenten time. Jesus and the Father are one.

And the second answer that John's gospel gives to Mary's question is that Jesus “abides with” his disciples (14:3, 18, 20, 23, 28). He “remains forever” (12:34). We find the Risen Lord here. He lives on in the community, in our brothers and sisters, and he dwells among us especially in the most needy. “When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink. When I was naked you clothed me.” Our Vincentian vocation is to seek and find him in the world's marginalized.

Mary Magdalen saw the Risen Savior. The good news she proclaimed was quite simple: “I have seen the Lord.” Do we too see him? Do we search for him in the bosom of the Father and rest in him there? Do we recognize him in the crucified peoples who surround us, and stand faithfully by them? This remarkable woman, from whom Jesus cast out seven devils, has much to teach us this Lent. I urge you to share her experience of loving the Crucified and Risen Lord deeply, and of proclaiming his presence, in word and work, to the most abandoned.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.  
Superior General