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Transcript of
“Women Disciples, Leaders, and Apostles: Mary Magdalene’s Sisters”

presented by
Carolyn Osiek, R.S.C.J.

Dr. Colleen Griffith:

Now it gives me great pleasure to introduce our speaker for this afternoon, Sister Carolyn Osiek. Sister Carolyn Osiek is a religious of the Sacred Heart and the

Carolyn Osiek is a past president of the Catholic Biblical Association and of the Society of Biblical Literature. She was the second woman to hold the presidency of the Catholic Biblical Association and the fourth elected to lead the Society of Biblical Literature. She has been associate editor of the New Testament Today and the New Testament book review editor for the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. She is the author of numerous books, commentaries, articles, and essays, many of which are now out of print. Some of her more celebrated titles include A Woman of the House Churches in Earliest Christianity, co-authored with Margaret MacDonald and James H. Charlesworth, published by Fortress Press. Also the book Ordained Women in the Early Church:

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that the Gospels preserve the original name. Magdala is Aramaic and Hebrew is Migdal for tower, but Taricheae means something different. It means salt fishing or salted fish, something like that which probably says the major business that went on there.

She's called a disciple. She's called isapostolos, equal to the apostles in the Greek tradition, apostola apostolorum, apostle of the apostles in the West, recipient of revelation from the Risen Jesus, prostitute, reformed prostitute, desert ascetic, sometimes confused with the legendary Mary of Egypt. Much of it... it's very interesting to look at the whole history of portrayals of her because she becomes this person out in the desert with a skull and all this kind of stuff, you know, but still just titillating enough, you know, to stir up a little interest in her. The secret wife of Jesus and the bearer of his child in The Da Vinci Code, and today she really is a lightning rod for issues of women's discipleship and ministry.

Will the real Mary Magdalene please stand up? And assuming that she probably isn't going to, I will just reflect for a moment on my own understanding of Mary Magdalene. You know, we all sort of ... we all sort of construct our own Magdalene. I see her really as a middle-aged woman, not young and beautiful. And of course the older I get, the older she gets. But probably a widow and probably a person of independent means.

You know, of course, that in the Eastern Church she never became a prostitute which is very interesting. That only happened in the West. Here's the place she comes from where the blue arrow is pointing. The map says Taricheae and Magdala on the west side of the lake. And here's something of what it looks like today. It is being excavated. The site is being excavated now, and they have discovered just recently a synagogue which they say is a pre-70 synagogue. The evidence I think is still out on that. I'm waiting to see it. But, it would be very exciting, certainly, because people say "Well, is this the synagogue that Mary Magdalene attended?" But, the ... there is excavation going on there today which is a great thing, because eventually and some years from now we will be able to visit the site again. But if you want to know more about the excavation, go to magdalaproject.org, ButuSan

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appear in Rome. Paul meets them, however. I shouldn't say that. Actually, they first appear in Corinth because that's where Paul meets them, but they had just come from Rome. We don't know if Priscilla was a mother or grandmother, and we don't know anything about household members traveling with them, which presumably would be the case. They would have a whole household of slaves if they are people of means, and they would all travel together. So, but Paul then later on says that he took up with them because they were in the same trade, being tentmakers or leatherworkers, whatever that means. So they're a business couple as well. And they had this family business of leatherworking and perhaps their movement around is for the sake of business. But where they go, they really become evangelizers. So in Acts 18, Paul in Corinth "found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife, Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome," and we'll come back to that in a minute.

Paul went to see them, and because they were of the same trade, they stayed together. So they meet in Corinth, and then they set off to the East. Paul is going back to Palestine, but in Ephesus in Asia Minor he leaves them. So in 1 Corinthians 16:19 the churches of Asia send greetings to the Corinthians because 1 Corinthians is written from Ephesus. So he says "the churches" ... and it's the capital, the commercial capital anyway, of the Roman province of Asia ... "The churches of Asia send greetings." That's what it means. It means just this little ... Asia means just this little piece. And "Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord." So we know that Aquila and Prisca have ... host a house church. But then, when Paul writes Romans some years later from Corinth he says, "Greet Prisca and Aquila." So it seems as if they're back in Rome. So they must have traveled around a bit. And greet them "who work with me in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life." And we do not know to what that is referring. And it's literal. It's an image that works in both Greek and English. It's literally what he says, "they risked their necks" in Greek "for my life," "and I give thanks and all the churches of the Gentiles of the nations." So something, some event has happened here that put Aquila and Prisca, (Prisca and Aquila in Romans, in that order) in danger for the sake of Paul. And there are a number of stories in Acts where Paul barely escapes. You know, it's a great adventure story. There isn't one about Prisca and Aquila. And so we're left to conjecture, to imagine. But Paul says it very clearly here that he is so tremendously grateful to them for what they did for him.

And here is the ... here are the distances that they travel, you see, from Rome on the left side of the map they meet in Corinth in the center. And then they took up in Ephesus in Asia Minor. And according to Romans, Paul's letter to the Romans, which we think comes toward the end of his life, they're back in Rome. And they are, therefore, traveling around.

Now when they host a house church, what kind of a "house" are we talking about? And here are five possibilities for the kind of place that they might have had, have owned, lived in, and hosted a group that would come in. This very large and spacious one from Pompeii, a much more modest one also from Pompeii, the house of ... so-called House of Diana in Ostia. This is really an apartment building in which there were three floors and private apartments. And so it could have been something much more modest like an apartment but then, of course, the numbers would be greatly reduced. In Rome there is this apartment building that is preserved in part here. Those of you who have been to Rome, you undoubtedly remember what's called "the wedding cake of Rome," the Victor Emmanuel Monument. That's it. That's the big white wall right behind this. So this is just nestled around the corner from that big monument and ... and, fortunately, has been preserved. It was one of these apartment buildings that were very frequent in imperial Rome. So... and then here we have in

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apostles are , but certainly it's quite clear here , with Paul it's a larger group than the Twelve. So they are then, we assume, among the apostles. Moving now.

But ,But ,

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Origen, the great third century biblical interpreter, thought that this loyal companion was Paul's wife whom he had left behind in Philippi. That's an interesting conjecture. But somebody there is supposed to referee between these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who seem to have this very serious disagreement with each other. Now it has also been suggested, and it's possible, that their disagreement was not between each other but it was them together against Paul. That is a possibility. I think the larger possibility is the other way, that they are not agreeing with each other. And it's ... the only ... they're the only people he sort of singles out in the Letter. Now he mentions Epaphroditus before that and he's sending him back, etc. But, I mean, there's this kind of focus on the appeal that these two women should work out their differences.

So why is their disagreement so important? Well, I at the very beginning of the Letter in the first verse: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the episkopoi and diakonoi." Eh, nobody knows exactly how to translate that. Are you going to say bishops and deacons? Well, okay. But to use the word bishop ... episkopos is the word that becomes bishop, but to use the word bishop is just so anachronistic at this point, you know, in the 60s of the first century and not anything like what we imagine a bishop to be. So superintendent, overseer, manager. It's a secular word that means those things, you see. But, this is the only letter that Paul addresses to a community and singles out roles like that, functions. All the other ones, it's just to the holy ones, to the saints in (da da da)... So maybe this community was sort of one of the leaders in identifying certain roles and having ... leadership roles and having sort of a job description for them. Many people think that the leaders of the house churches were the people who eventually formed, as this rolls on, eventually formed like a council for the city out of which eventually down the pike, not here but later, one is elected as a first among many. And then you evolve into the office of bishop as we understand it, you see. So I just wonder if Euodia and Syntyche are perhaps episkopoi, that is, leaders of house churches who have ... who bear that title. And it ... is their disagreement that is causing all this difficulty.

Now I put in here 3 John 1:9 - 10, which is by another author, entirely different situation, but I think it illuminates this. This is the Johannine author. "I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority." (That's the NRSV translation.) Literally, it says he does not receive us. "So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not content with false charges, he refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church." Do we have here, an entirely different situation, an echo of perhaps what's going on with Euodia and Syntyche in Philippi? In other words, that they are very influential leaders in the community. You know, she is the only person named a diakonos of a specific church in the New Testament.

That's a possibility. Do they have families? Do any of these portrayed their funerary monument something like this family at the Vatican. Or this one, also

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century we think. In 1915, this monument, this inscription that you see on the left was discovered in several pieces on the Mount of Olives, in a cemetery context on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. It was pieced together. You have a transcription of it on the right side so that you can read the letters a little more clearly. And it says, "Here lies the slave and bride of Christ, Sophia the deacon, the second Phoebe, who fell asleep in peace on the 21st of March ..." And then it gets broken off. There's something later about the Lord God so it's probably something like, "May the Lord God give her peace," or something like that, you know. And we don't have the year, just the day of the month.

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accompaniment of women who were traveling on business or other reasons for travel, pilgrimage too. There is a deaconess who was buried at the Monastery of St. George Koziba in the Wadi Qilt on the way between Jerusalem and Jericho. In the cemetery there which was excavated, there was a deaconess who was buried there. Now that's a male monastery. What is that deaconess doing buried there? Well, she probably died there on her way to Jerusalem or on the way back home. So, you know, another indication of a deaconess who was traveling. So all of those roles were important for the deaconesses. If you want to know more about that, the book by Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek *Ordained Women in the Early Church*, it's back there. So that's Sophia.

And we turn now to Guilia Runa, presbiterissa, who lived about 40 years. It's a Latin inscription and it comes from the church of St. Augustine in Hippo, but it comes from after the time of Augustine. Guilia Runa, as you can guess from the name, is not Latin. She's not Greek. She's not Jewish. She's Vandal. The barbarians from the north who had come across through Spain, across Gibraltar and into North Africa, and they were making their way across North Africa heading east. As Augustine lay dying in 430, they were coming really close to Hippo. And the Vandal invasion happened just after he died; I think about a month after. And we don't know much about these people. They were Christians. They were Aryan Christians. We know very little about their liturgy or about their church organization. And the interesting thing is that the inscription is in Latin. So they picked up Latin when they got to North Africa. Latin was the common language. And so we have a woman here who is called a presbiterissa. Presbyteria would be enough to make it feminine, but presbiterissa, an extra feminine ending on it like diaconissa, deaconess. Again we know so little about her.

It's possible ... with these inscriptions of women presbyters we have... you have to be very, very careful, because presbyter and the female feminine presbyteria can mean simply "elder." So it can mean just an older person. And yet sometimes it seems not to mean that. It seems to mean something else. For example, there's another inscription from south Italy of a woman named Leta, Leta presbyteria, whose husband dedicates the inscription to her. She has died, and the husband doesn't even give his name. And the argument goes that she must really have had the office of presbyter, whatever that means, because otherwise he would be the important person in the inscription. You see? Or there's a woman from Dalmatia up north, Croatia, that area, named Flavia Vitalia, presbyteria. There's an inscription that's not a funerary inscription. It's an account of how a man named Theodosius bought a piece of property, of church property from her hands. She was the agent. And so again you say, if she represents the church in the sale of property, it's not just that we're calling her an elder person. I mean, she's ... she has the title of presbyteria.

And you may know about the famous letter of Gelasius, bishop of Rome around 494, to the bishops of

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