

Saint Mary Magdalene



Novena and Prayers

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What Is a Novena?

The Catholic tradition of praying novenas has its roots in the earliest days of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles we read that after the ascension of Jesus, the apostles returned to the upper room in Jerusalem, where they all devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and the Mother of Jesus (see Acts 1:14), following Jesus' instruction to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Based on this, Christians have always prayed for various needs, trusting that God both hears and answers prayers. This prayer of the first Christian community was the first "novena" and lasted nine days.

The word "novena" is derived from the Latin term *novem*, meaning nine. In biblical times numbers held deep symbolism for people. The number three, for example, symbolized perfection, fullness, completeness. The number nine—three times three—symbolized perfection times perfection. Novenas

developed because it was thought that—symbolically speaking—nine days represented the perfect amount of time to pray.

Whether a novena is made solemnly (in a parish church in preparation for a feast day), or privately, as Christians we really never pray alone. Through Baptism we have become members of the Body of Christ and are thereby united with every other member of Christ's Mystical Body. When we pray we are spiritually united with all the other members.

Just as we pray with each other while here on earth, those who have gone before us and are united with God in heaven can pray for us and intercede for us as well. We Catholics use the term “communion of saints” to refer to this exchange of spiritual help among the members of the Church on earth, those who have died and are being purified, and the saints in heaven. Devotions to the saints can help us witness to our faith and encourage us to lead lives of holiness and service as they did.

Brief Biography of Saint Mary Magdalene

What do we really know about Saint Mary Magdalene? Scholars still debate about the actual identity of Mary Magdalene, and the Church has taken no official position. Popes, fathers of the Church, and saints have held differing views. Let us see then what the Gospels tell us about Mary of Magdala, and let our hearts tell us the rest of the story.

The name Magdalene identifies Mary with the place of her birth, Magdala. At the time of Christ, it was a populous and relatively wealthy town on the coast of Galilee known for its dye works and textiles. This gives rise to the supposition that Mary of Magdala was probably a woman of means. And it was out of these means that she, together with other women, supported the ministry of Jesus, as related in the Gospel according to Luke (8:2–3). Mary gets

special mention in two of the Gospel narratives because of a singular fact: Jesus Master freed her of *seven demons* (Mk 16:9; Lk 8:2). We do not know if these “demons” manifested themselves in an illness or in a disordered life, but we do know that the symbolic number seven meant that her distress was severe: Mary of Magdala was a woman in need, a woman who recognized her need and opened herself to the healing powers of Jesus Christ with faith and trust.

From the early centuries of the Church until today many have acknowledged Mary Magdalene as the sinner who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair (see Lk 7:36–50) and as the sister of Martha and Lazarus (see Lk 10:38–42; Jn 11:1–5; 12:1–8), which is why she is considered the patron saint of penitents and converts, as well as contemplatives. Others contest this.

Was she a sinner? Everyone born in original sin is a sinner—only the Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved free from sin. Scripture tells us that the just man falls seven times a day (see Prv 24:16). Every saint will readily admit to his or her sinfulness. Mary Magdalene was no exception. But the secret of her sanctity was that she “loved much” (like the sinful woman Jesus praised; see Lk 7:36–50) and

surrendered herself completely to the love and will of God. This is why she has appealed to sinners throughout the long history of the Church, interceding for them and leading them to the Lord she so loved.

Mary Magdalene followed Jesus of Nazareth up and down Palestine, exposed to the elements and harried by the crowds as she ministered to Jesus and his disciples. She was always observing, listening, learning, and pondering, to the point of being transformed. Together with the Mother of the Lord, Mary of Magdala stands by Jesus in his humiliating agony and death. She does not run; she is steadfast, present. She suffers the taunts and the jeers of those who mock and wag their heads. She cannot stop the blasphemy, but she can love in reparation for those who blaspheme and torture. Artists depict her pouring herself out at the foot of the Cross, united in the suffering of Jesus, who offers his life to the Father for our salvation.

Tradition, art, and Scripture all attest that Mary of Magdala was present at the burial of Jesus (Mt 27:61; Mk 15:47; Lk 23:55–56), watching where he was buried, perhaps even assisting with the burial preparations. Matthew hints that Mary Magdalene and another Mary kept vigil at the tomb until late in

the night. Even after the horrors of Calvary her only thought is Jesus; her only desire, to be near him. She does not go into hiding but proclaims her love for him in courageous vigil.

No word is recorded from Mary Magdalene's lips until the body of Jesus is discovered missing on Easter morning. Then she breaks her silence. She runs straightaway to Simon Peter whom she finds with John. Breathless she exclaims, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him!" (Jn 20:2). It is the anguished cry of the bride, who in the *Song of Songs* searches the city for her beloved. Jesus is gone! In her soul all is dark. The Light of her life has been taken from her. Mary will not rest until she finds him. He alone can restore her peace and her happiness. Those radiant, angelic beings, guarding the empty tomb, only disquiet Mary Magdalene all the more. They ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She says, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him" (Jn 20:13).

Hers is the plight of all those who look for Jesus among the dead. . . . Mary's intense pain has robbed her memory of the promise of resurrection, so much so that when Jesus appears to her she does not

recognize him. He is glorified, while she is still very much of the earth. She thinks he is the gardener . . . until his voice breaks through her grief: “Mary!” *He speaks like no man has ever spoken before . . .* (see Jn 7:46)—her name spoken with infinite love! There is only *one* man who speaks like this, whom the wind and sea obey (see Mt 8:27) and before whom even the powers of internal darkness dissolve. Mary Magdalene’s heart, so attuned to his voice, believes and exults, and she cries out in Hebrew, “*Rabbouni!*” which means, “my Master” (see Jn 20:16). How much joy in one word! It is the perfect act of faith and of love.

But the story does not end here with Mary of Magdala holding on to the risen Jesus to keep him from disappearing again. No. The most important chapter of all, as far as Mary’s life is concerned, is about to begin on this “first day of the week”: Jesus himself invests Mary Magdalene with the office of Apostle to the apostles, “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (Jn 20:17). Mary goes. She runs! She is the first to proclaim the good news of the resurrection of Christ, and with it

the fulfillment of God's loving plan of salvation for every man and woman. Hers is a breathless and joyous proclamation to the Church and to the world!

In this moment Mary's mission in life is revealed: to proclaim hope, love, and life to the world, found in the person and redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord. As Archbishop Fulton Sheen so beautifully expressed it, "*She was to break the precious alabaster box of His Resurrection so that its perfume might fill the world.*"¹

Mary Magdalene's feast day is July 22.

1. Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 594.