

## Mary Magdalene:

### Sexism and Feminism in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*

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#### 1) Introduction

The following paper centers on the figure of Mary Magdalene in the movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), interpreted by actress Barbara Hershey and directed by Martin Scorsese. The movie is based on the novel with the same title written in 1955 by Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis. The story does not follow the Bible, as explained in the disclaimer at the beginning of the movie: "This film is not based on the Gospels, but upon the fictional exploration of the eternal spiritual conflict." It generated much controversy among Christian conservative groups, who considered it blasphemous. The film depicts the life of Jesus (interpreted by Willem Dafoe) and explores Jesus' struggles with his dual nature: flesh versus spirit, human versus divine. Jesus' humanity is central to the movie as is his temptation to live an ordinary life and his plight to accept his divine role. Sexuality is, therefore, one of the main temptations Jesus faces when confronting his human nature, and Mary Magdalene is central to this theme. She is one of the main characters, alongside Jesus and Judas, and is presented as a reformed prostitute who becomes a faithful follower of Christ and, later on, Jesus' wife.

To examine how Scorsese portrays Mary Magdalene, the first part of this paper goes back to the Gospels and analyzes this biblical character and the inaccurate historical myth that emerged at the beginning of Christianity, referred to as the pre-Vatican II tradition. Even though Mary Magdalene in the Gospels is presented as a faithful disciple and there are no references that she was a prostitute, this image started to shift during the times of Pope

Gregory the Great (540-604), when the Church began to misrepresent her as a sinful woman. This depiction created a Mary Magdalene with a double nature, a dichotomy between sexuality, sin, and prostitution versus penitence, chastity, and devotion, which will persist in the Church tradition and popular culture for centuries. It will not be until the twentieth century with the post-Vatican II tradition that the figure of Mary Magdalene is officially restored by the Papacy, recognizing her as the “apostle of the Apostles.”

The second section of the paper centers on the Magdalene tradition in film, illustrating the most common traits, such as promiscuity, sexuality, beauty, and sin. Later, the paper examines the specific portrayal of Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, explaining the principal scenes in which she appears.

The core of the paper presents two different interpretations of Scorsese’s Mary Magdalene: first, the feminist critique, which argues that Scorsese created a sexist version of the biblical character, and second, the viewpoint that sees Scorsese as incorporating feminist elements around her. These opposite perspectives demonstrate a duality of sexism and feminism in the movie. Hence, this essay argues that this duality around Mary Magdalene in the film is in fact a necessary element to fulfill the plot of the movie, to explore Jesus’ humanity, and to help Jesus accept his redemptive role.

## **2) Mary Magdalene in the Gospels and in the Church Tradition**

To analyze Scorsese’s portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute, it is important to recognize where this tradition came from. In the Gospels, Mary Magdalene is mentioned thirteen times, mostly accompanied by other women.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament does not provide much information about her; it only associates her with Magdala, a town on the shore of the Galilee Sea. Luke explains that she was one of the women who provided for Jesus and his disciples (Luke 8:1-3). Luke and Mark narrate that Jesus cast out seven evil spirits from her,

although no more details of this event are explained (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9). Besides this, she is especially important during the death and resurrection of Christ: she witnessed the crucifixion (Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40-47; John 19:25), she was at Jesus' burial (Matthew 27:61; Mark 15:47), and she is one of the witnesses of the empty tomb on the Sunday following Jesus' crucifixion (Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-7; John 20:1). Then, she saw the resurrection, spoke to Christ, and reported the resurrection to the apostles (Matthew 28:9-10; Mark 16:9-11; John 20:11-18). She is not mentioned in any other book of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Nor, in any of these passages, is she associated with sinfulness or prostitution; instead, the text depicts her as a faithful follower of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene's devoted reputation in early Christianity started to change and eventually became a symbol of sin, impurity, sexuality, and penitence. Anthony Le Donne, professor of New Testament at the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, explains the connection of evils and demons with "unclean spirits" (Mark 1:26 and 3:11).<sup>3</sup> Thus, following Le Donne's idea, considering that seven evil spirits were cast out of Mary Magdalene by Jesus (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9), this act could be the source of the initial association of impurity and sin with Mary Magdalene.<sup>4</sup> In addition, one of the earliest pieces of evidence of the distortion around this figure is in the writings of Ephraim the Syrian (306-373)<sup>5</sup>, who identified her with the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50).<sup>6</sup> Later, at the end of the sixth century, the official ecclesiastical position on the sinfulness and repentance of Mary Magdalene came with Pope Gregory the Great (540-604). In his Homily 33 (591-92)<sup>7</sup>, Gregory the Great associates Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha (John 11:1-12:8; Luke 10:38-42), and again with the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50). Gregory interprets the seven evil spirits cast out by Jesus (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9) as vices, and the perfume of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50) as a sign of her sensuality.<sup>8</sup> From this,

the popular image of the “new” Mary Magdalene emerges and will last until contemporary times, identifying her with Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and with sinfulness and penitence, saved only by Jesus.<sup>9</sup> This image of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute who reforms and devotes herself to Jesus will expand in the sixth century, with the popularization of legends about penitent harlots, such as the lives of Thais, Mary of Egypt, or Pelagia.<sup>10</sup>

Until 1969 with the revision of the General Roman Calendar, after the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church did not officially revise Mary Magdalene’s canonical definition.<sup>11</sup> Then, the Vatican restored her figure, recognized that the Gospels provide no evidence of her sinfulness, and distinguished her from the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36–50) and from Mary of Bethany (John 11:1–12:8; Luke 10:38–42).<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, from 1988, recognizes the importance of Mary Magdalene as “the apostle of the Apostles” for being the first witness of the resurrection and the first one to announce the resurrection to the Apostles.<sup>13</sup> As John Paul II mentions, the title “apostle of the Apostles” attributed to Mary Magdalene is a name already given by Rabanus Maurus (780-856) in the ninth century and by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in the thirteenth century, which contradicts the popular legend of Mary Magdalene as just the penitent sinner.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in 2016, Pope Francis fully rehabilitated Mary Magdalene’s reputation by elevating her liturgical memory to the status of Festivity, celebrated on July 22nd, the same prestige as the other evangelists and apostles, praising her as “an example of a true and authentic evangeliser.”<sup>15</sup> Arthur Roche, then Archbishop Secretary and later cardinal Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, highlights the relevance of Mary Magdalene following Anselm of Canterbury’s words: “chosen because you are beloved and beloved because you are chosen of God.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Vatican document of 2016 is essential because it officially repairs, again, the error that lasted

for centuries that damaged her image. This also reestablishes the faithful reputation of Mary Magdalene found in the Gospels.

### **3)The Magdalene Tradition in Film**

The misinterpretation of Mary Magdalene throughout Christian history created a double nature around this woman, a dichotomy between sexuality, sin, and prostitution versus penitence, chastity, and devotion. This duality is present in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. However, before entering into the specific representation of this character in the movie, it is important to explain the main traits of the Magdalene tradition in film.

When examining films about Jesus' life, Mary Magdalene can be considered the most preeminent female character, specifically exhibiting sexual promiscuity and eroticism. Thus, filmmakers often take the pre-Vatican II tradition of the repentant sinner and reformed prostitute as the central feature to portray Mary Magdalene.<sup>17</sup> Mary Magdalene's physical appearance is a common element that repeats throughout films: she is beautiful and sensual, usually with long hair, jewelry, makeup, and clothes that invoke her nudity, following Western beauty standards that reflect a sexualized image of the saint (as is the case in *The Last Temptation of Christ*).<sup>18</sup>

For instance, religious scholar Adele Reinhartz explains that films before the 1980s emphasize Mary Magdalene's promiscuous past and provide moral judgment over it. Conversely, after 1980, Jesus movies do not ignore her sinner past, but this is not her central feature nor the source of moral judgment when presenting Mary Magdalene.<sup>19</sup> In addition, Reinhartz explains four challenges filmmakers face when portraying Mary Magdalene: the first challenge concerns Mary Magdalene's life before Jesus, which is usually interpreted as her being an adulteress or a prostitute, as in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Second, filmmakers struggle to portray Mary Magdalene among the apostles and how to interpret the

relationship between her and the other disciples. The third challenge concerns the representation of Mary Magdalene as apostle of the Apostles, based on John 20:11-18, and how to reproduce this role following the Vatican decree of 2016. Fourth, filmmakers are challenged when representing the relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus.<sup>20</sup>

Reinhartz explains that most movies present an asymmetrical relationship between these two characters, stressing the hierarchy between Jesus and Mary Magdalene because he is the one who saves and takes spiritual care of her.<sup>21</sup>

Jesus' sexuality is another important aspect to bear in mind when talking about religious movies and Mary Magdalene. Reinhartz classifies three different categories of Jesus and his sexuality: the first is the "asexual Jesus," whose humanity did not include a sexual dimension and did not engage in any sexual relationship. This Jesus offers his love equally to all people. Second, there is the "conflicted Jesus," where his humanity is stressed, presented as a character with sexual desires and feelings who does not act sexually due to his divine mission. This "conflicted Jesus" is the Jesus of the first part of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Third, Reinhartz lists the "sexual Jesus," where Jesus' humanity is accentuated by his participation in sexual activities, as portrayed in the last part of *The Last Temptation of Christ*.<sup>22</sup>

#### **4) Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)**

*The Last Temptation of Christ* was released on August 12, 1988. It was directed by Martin Scorsese, with a screenplay by Paul Schrader. Scorsese, raised Catholic, had a dream of making a movie about the life of Jesus since he was ten-years old,<sup>23</sup> which he accomplished with the release of this film.<sup>24</sup> Both the book and the movie have been considered blasphemous by certain conservative Christian groups due to the accentuated humanity of Christ and his engagement in sexual activities and homosexual overtones.<sup>25</sup>

The emphasis of Jesus' divinity and humanity are key elements in the film. Jesuit scholar Lloyd Baugh explains that films about Jesus can follow a "high Christology" dimension, which privileges the divinity of Jesus, or a "low Christology" dimension, which emphasizes Jesus' humanity; *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Baugh argues, presents an even "lower" Christology," placing Jesus' humanity as the central element of the film.<sup>26</sup> Scorsese presents Jesus (Willem Dafoe) as an imperfect human struggling to accept his divine mission, consistent with this "lower" Christology. In the title, the "last temptation" refers to the everyday temptation to ordinariness, which Scorsese fully reveals in the last scene. When Jesus is on the cross, Satan appears to him as a young girl and his guardian angel to help him come down from the cross and, moreover, invites him to live an ordinary life: to settle down, to marry, to have a family. Here, Jesus finally consummates a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene after they marry and conceive a child. Mary Magdalene dies before giving birth, and Jesus later marries Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters. Not until Jesus is old do Judas and the apostles reveal the guardian angel was actually Satan. With this, Jesus recognizes that all was a dream, a fantasy, and a hallucination while on the cross. Finally, it is only by confronting this last temptation of ordinariness and humanness that Jesus accepts his mission and recognizes he has to die.<sup>27</sup> He rediscovers God's call and returns to the cross, gaining consciousness and abandoning the hallucination, triumphing over the last temptation. Then, he dies on the cross and accomplishes God's mission.<sup>28</sup>

The culminating point of the movie is the "last temptation" faced by Christ before he can fulfill God's mission. This temptation was not a sexual temptation; instead, it was a temptation to embrace ordinariness and the invitation to live a domestic life.<sup>29</sup> It is a temptation to become human.<sup>30</sup> Mary Magdalene is a crucial character in the whole movie and becomes even more central in the last temptation scene. She is portrayed by actress Barbara Hershey and is a sexually charged character. In the movie, Mary Magdalene and

Jesus have been friends since childhood. Mary Magdalene becomes a prostitute after Jesus rejects her. Therefore, Scorsese is taking up the pre-Vatican II Magdalene tradition: she is again associated with vices, sin, sensuality, and prostitution, following Gregory the Great's stance. Then, she is identified with the biblical scene of the unnamed sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36–50), but instead, in the film, Jesus is the one who anoints Mary Magdalene's feet. In addition, Scorsese portrays Mary Magdalene as the woman caught in adultery, being stoned by a crowd, and then saved by Jesus (John 8:1–11). Scorsese is following the long tradition of presenting this figure as a sinful woman.

Mary Magdalene first appears in the film when she spits in Jesus' face while he is working for the Romans making crosses for crucifixion. Next, Jesus visits her brothel, seeking her forgiveness before going into the desert. Jesus waits inside the brothel until all her clients leave. The brothel scene accentuates Mary Magdalene's nudity, sensuality, and sinfulness, revealing her profession and workplace, and the romantic past that she had with Jesus. In the brothel, Jesus seeks Mary Magdalene's forgiveness for leading her away from God and for rejecting her, the act which led Mary Magdalene to become a prostitute. In the scene, Jesus feels guilty for Mary Magdalene's station as a prostitute.<sup>31</sup> Scorsese explains the importance of the brothel scene: “[T]he point of the scene was to show the proximity of sexuality to Jesus, the occasion of sin. [...] This extended scene suggests Jesus's conflicted desires as he watches the carnal temptations on display. Yet, he refuses to indulge his sexual desires just as he resists the first desert temptation.”<sup>32</sup>

Mary Magdalene's role frequently identifies her with temptation. In the desert, Jesus is tempted by snakes that speak seductively with her voice. Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, scholar of religion, argues that this image evokes Genesis 3 and Eve and the long tradition of women as temptation.<sup>33</sup> Mary Magdalene's next appearance is with Scorsese's adaptation of John 8:1–11, the woman caught in adultery and saved by Jesus. From that point on, Mary



Magdalene abandons her profession and life of sin and follows Jesus, becoming another of his disciples. Before the final scene of the hallucination, two other crucial moments for Mary Magdalene are her participation in the Last Supper along with Jesus' mother and Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters, and her presence during the crucifixion. These two scenes contrast with the sinful image from the beginning of the movie and place her as another apostle (the "apostle of the Apostles"). The culminating point for the characterization of Mary Magdalene is the dream or hallucination scene. After descending the cross, Jesus marries Mary Magdalene, who is dressed in white, a virginal sign. They have a marital sexual encounter from which Mary Magdalene becomes pregnant, but she dies before childbirth.

### **5) Sexism or Feminism in Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*?**

From seeing how Scorsese portrays Mary Magdalene, two positions emerge: Is Scorsese only following and perpetuating sexism and the negative myth around Mary Magdalene as a penitent sinner and reformed prostitute? Or is he instead introducing feminist elements that empower Mary Magdalene?

#### **Sexist aspects of the movie**

First, several authors critique sexist aspects of the movie. Scorsese's Mary Magdalene is presented as a sexual being and as temptation throughout the movie, exemplifying the long pre-Vatican II tradition around sinfulness and prostitution. Feminist authors agree that this film is a revised representation of the "harlotized" version of Mary Magdalene, which fails to be historically accurate while negating her apostolic leadership.<sup>34</sup> As professor of film Lucy Bolton argues, the movie perpetuates this negative myth, marking Mary Magdalene's sexuality as a threat and being a character punished and humiliated by patriarchy who is only redeemed and reformed by Jesus.<sup>35</sup>

Another sexist aspect in the movie is Mary Magdalene's association with Eve, which evokes temptation and sin. This is exemplified in different movie scenes: snakes decorate the brothel's entrance, Jesus is tempted by black snakes that speak with Mary Magdalene's voice, and Mary Magdalene wears leafy tattoos.<sup>36</sup> Author Melanie J. Wright notes that her henna tattoos emphasize her body as a site of commodity and a symbol of her prostitution.<sup>37</sup> Thus, characterizing Mary Magdalene as a prostitute is one of the main targets of this feminist critique. Prostitution, according to biblical scholar Jane Schaberg, is a sign of male sexual domination over the female body.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, scholar of English Tammy Kennedy observes that portraying Mary Magdalene as a prostitute makes her a "sexual servant of men" and shows "Scorsese's inability to represent women as other than sexual."<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, Wright notes that Scorsese's sexualization of Mary Magdalene through her prostitution traps her in a passive and inferior role.<sup>40</sup> This passivity is evidenced if contrasted with Judas' character. While the audience learns nothing about Mary Magdalene's thoughts, questions, or feelings after becoming a disciple, Judas reflects the opposite: he has a participative and intellectual role in a constant theological conversation with Jesus, discussing messiahship and the divine mission. Thus, Wright remarks that Scorsese provides a gendered vision of the story.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, this author argues that through the different roles Scorsese gives to Mary Magdalene (first the prostitute, then the reformed devout disciple, next the virginal bride, and finally the pregnant wife in the hallucination scene), Mary Magdalene's body remains "her sole means of expression, her total person."<sup>42</sup> This evokes a patriarchal "women-as-biology determinism" that can be evidenced by Jesus taking different wives in the hallucination scene (Mary and Martha, Lazarus' sisters, after Mary Magdalene's death).<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, New Testament professor William R. Telford argues that the movie's female characters only represent patriarchal symbols: motherhood, temptation, and

sexuality.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Burnette-Bletsch considers that with the exception of Mary, Jesus' mother, the rest of the main female characters (Mary Magdalene and Lazarus' sisters) become a symbol of sexual temptation that he must deny (particularly during the hallucination scene).<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Baugh explains that the phrase Scorsese includes from Kazantzakis' novel reaffirms this idea: "Only one woman exists in the world, one woman with countless faces," tells the guardian angel (Satan) to Jesus after Mary Magdalene's death to encourage him to marry Lazarus' sisters. This sexist statement demonstrates how Scorsese perpetuates the idea that women are primarily sexual beings and sexual temptations.<sup>46</sup>

Further, Wright adds that after the stoning episode in which Jesus saves Mary Magdalene, she is transformed, abandoning her profession, and becoming a devout follower of Christ. This shows the prostitute-chaste dichotomy of the Magdalene tradition that has dominated the myth around her. With this change, Mary Magdalene's appearance also transforms: her tattoos, makeup, and jewelry –signs of decadence and sensuality– are now replaced by modest, proper, and chaste garments. This is the new and reformed Mary Magdalene who presents a "God-fearing identity patterned par excellence in Christian iconography by Mary the Mother of Jesus."<sup>47</sup> In adding to this, Kennedy maintains that Scorsese's portrayal shows patriarchal binaries: male/female, Madonna/prostitute, suffering/pleasure, or spirituality/sexuality,<sup>48</sup> stressing the inferior role of Mary Magdalene and the other female characters and diminishing their agency.<sup>49</sup>

### **Feminist aspects of the movie**

On the other hand, *The Last Temptation of Christ* can also be interpreted as presenting a feminist version of Mary Magdalene, incorporating elements that empower her, which contrasts with the above feminist critique.

Mary Magdalene, co-created by Scorsese and Hershey, is one of the main characters in the movie. In contrast to the sexist elements, Wright also recognizes that Scorsese does not

assimilate Mary Magdalene or Lazarus' sisters to traditional Christian patterns of obedience and chastity.<sup>50</sup> For Hershey, prostitution is not a source of shame and inferiority but another aspect of Mary Magdalene's womanhood. She says:

The thing that fascinated me about Mary Magdalene is that she represents all aspects of womanhood: she's a whore and a victim, a complete primal animal, and then she's reborn and becomes virginal and sisterlike. She evolves through all phases of womanhood, so it was a wonderful role in that way...I felt that I was put on earth to play this part.<sup>51</sup>

Considering this, theologian Matthew S. Rindge proposes that the movie celebrates and reaffirms female sexuality. When Mary Magdalene abandons prostitution, she stops being promiscuous but continues being sexual because she engages again in a sexual relationship during the hallucination scene, this time with Jesus. Her sexuality is emphasized in her role as a bride, wife, and pregnant woman, which demonstrates that she remains sexual throughout the movie. Rindge writes: "If Mary's sexuality is redeemed, it is not because she renounces sexuality and becomes non-sexual or asexual. Mary's transition is rather from one type of sexuality (promiscuous) to another (monogamous)."<sup>52</sup> The shift from promiscuity to monogamy is symbolized with the white dress she wears at the wedding. Thus, Rindge states that Mary Magdalene's sexuality is inherent in her characterization, and her sexual relationships during marriage demonstrate that these are not signs of sinfulness.

Furthermore, Hershey herself highlights the crucial role of Mary Magdalene in the overall movie. The actress states: "Marty had me walking with Jesus and the disciples in many scenes. The only scenes I couldn't appear in were the ones at the temple where women weren't allowed. He even embraced the idea of Christ having women at the Last Supper."<sup>53</sup> Hence, one of the most important elements that shows the main role of women in the movie is the Last Supper scene. Mary Magdalene, along with Mary, Jesus' mother, and Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, participates in the Last Supper alongside Jesus. Scorsese himself

expresses that he interpreted the Last Supper as an event embracing both followers, women and men. He states:

Jesus was so great, I just couldn't see him telling the women at the Last Supper, "Wait in the kitchen." I remember saying, "How could he say 'wait in the kitchen' to those ladies?" Especially since he was a man who broke the rules.[...] He would have them take part in the first Mass. I don't think he made a distinction between men and women. Why should he?<sup>54</sup>

Another important element that contrasts with the feminist critique is that Mary Magdalene is part of the overall divine mission. Scorsese explains: "She, like Judas, is part of his sacrifice and redemption. They are both holier than the other characters."<sup>55</sup> For this reason, Scorsese gives Mary Magdalene more protagonism than in other Jesus films: she appears in a total of fifteen scenes, her voice is in two additional scenes, and Jesus talks about her in three other scenes.<sup>56</sup> In parallel, Rindge also supports that Mary Magdalene is crucial for Jesus' divine journey by interpreting the hallucination scene more realistically.<sup>57</sup> While Jesus also redeems Mary Magdalene, she is "a redeemer of Jesus" and "a catalyst" for Jesus' personal transformation in order to accomplish the divine mission.<sup>58</sup> Rindge explains Mary Magdalene's redemptive role by examining three key moments.

First, Mary Magdalene helps Jesus embrace and accept his sexuality during the hallucination scene, a fundamental part of his humanity. Scorsese states: "Ultimately the last temptation is about living life quietly as a human being, raising a family, having the joys and the sorrows in life of a human being, and part of that includes sexuality... But that wasn't the last temptation. The last temptation was to be a human being."<sup>59</sup> Rindge explains that "Jesus' lifelong rejection of his sexual desires for Mary is one of the ways he seeks to avoid his own humanity. Mary helps Jesus recognize the integral role of sexuality in his humanity."<sup>60</sup> By accepting his sexuality during the dream scene, Jesus accepts his humanity, and only after doing so can he come back to the cross, accept his divine role, and accomplish God's

mission. This would not be possible without marrying Mary Magdalene in the hallucination scene. Then, Mary Magdalene is key in this step of his redemptive journey.

Second, Mary Magdalene's prostitution is also a necessary element in Jesus' redemptive journey. The movie depicts Jesus as the cause for Mary Magdalene's becoming a prostitute because when Jesus rejects her, she enters prostitution, as explained in Kazantzakis' novel.<sup>61</sup> In the novel, Jesus confesses: "It's my fault that Magdalene descended to prostitution..."<sup>62</sup> Then, marrying Mary Magdalene in the hallucination scene means rectifying the pain he inflicted to her because without this Jesus' redemptive path cannot be fulfilled. Rindge writes: "Jesus' own path to redemption thus entails making this right with Mary."<sup>63</sup> This is another aspect that evidences the redeemer role of Mary Magdalene and explains why Scorsese portrayed her as a prostitute.

Third, Rindge talks about Jesus' cowardice and fear. This can be seen in different moments of the movie. In the brothel scene, Mary Magdalene accuses Jesus of cowardice when he rejects her sexual advances. She tells him: "Is that the way you show you're a man?... You never had the courage to be a man... If you weren't hanging on to your mother, you were hanging onto me. Now you're hanging on to God. You're going to the desert to hide because you're scared." Later, Jesus recognizes his own fear and cowardice when he confesses to a desert monk: "You want to know who my God is? Fear. You look inside me and that's all you'll find." Then, Rindge affirms that Jesus marrying Mary Magdalene in the dream scene is "an act of supreme courage," necessary to accomplish his redemptive journey: "Acting courageously is part of Jesus' redemptive journey, a development Mary facilitates through her willingness to challenge him."<sup>64</sup> Without Mary Magdalene's sexuality and provocation, Jesus would not have confronted his fear of sexuality and acted courageously. By examining these three moments, Rindge confirms Scorsese's claim:

[W]hat's important is that she's part of the overall scheme, by God, to create Jesus as the redeemer. She, as much as Judas, is part of the overall scheme. And if they are

plagued and condemned for being sinful characters, they have to do it because of Jesus, because of the redemption, because of the sacrifice, and therefore they are holier.<sup>65</sup>

Rindge's argument of the redeemer role given to Mary Magdalene in the movie is further expanded by also interpreting Mary Magdalene as a disciple and apostle, which demonstrates another empowering element of this character. During Mary Magdalene's transformation in the movie, she becomes Jesus' disciple. After the Sermon on the Mount, she wants to accompany him on his journey; however, Jesus answers: "No. Stay here. You'll know when. Tell people about me"; this shows Jesus' affirmation for her preaching his message and for becoming an apostle. In the later scenes, Mary Magdalene accompanies him (the wedding at Cana, the resurrection of Lazarus, and other teaching sequences) and walks to Jesus' right as one of his disciples. The culmination of her role as a faithful follower of Christ in the movie comes with her presence in the Last Supper and at the crucifixion, which demonstrates she is a loyal disciple and apostle.<sup>66</sup>

#### **6) Scorsese's Mary Magdalene: the duality of sexism and feminism to fulfill Jesus' divine journey**

The sexist and feminist elements around Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation of Christ* illustrate the double nature around this character, a dichotomy between sexuality, sin, and prostitution versus penitence, chastity, and devotion that started around the sixth century but that persisted throughout Christian history, making its way into film, as Scorsese's movie demonstrates. In her work, scholar of religion M. Gail Hamner notes Scorsese's challenges in portraying female characters, and this is present in the duality of sexism and feminism that surrounds Mary Magdalene in the film.

In her research, Hamner examines Scorsese's first seven films (which does not include *The Last Temptation of Christ*) and states that a common trope of Scorsese's male

characters is their need for emotional and sexual intimacy with women.<sup>67</sup> I contend that this common aspect is also present in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, where Jesus engages in a sexual and emotional relationship first with Mary Magdalene, this being one of the main themes of the movie, and later with Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha.

While stating that Scorsese is not a feminist, Hamner describes the religious dimension of his movies that influence his portrayal of female characters in the following manner: a first dimension places women “as religious sites of purity and affective healing in ways that simply double down on the White masculine dominance that defines modernity,” while in the second dimension, “the films pull from an angle against Catholicism in ways that heighten modernity’s contradictions and complicate the desires and actions of his troubled male protagonists.”<sup>68</sup> I argue that these two religious dimensions are found in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, concretely in the duality of sexism and feminism around Mary Magdalene. On one hand, this first dimension is demonstrated with Scorsese’s perpetuation of sexism and male dominance in the movie, mirroring Mary Magdalene’s pre-Vatican II negative tradition. Scorsese first portrays her as a prostitute and symbol of sexual temptation, then as a repentant and reformed sinner (after Jesus saves her), and later on as faithful and pure disciple (remember the white bride dress). On the other hand, this film also includes the second religious dimension because the director also rejects traditional Catholic pre-Vatican II portrayals of Mary Magdalene. Scorsese empowers her by incorporating feminist elements, such as placing her in the Last Supper scene, giving her a main role in the movie, identifying her as a redeemer of Jesus, and presenting her as a faithful disciple. From all these elements, Scorsese’s Mary Magdalene displays characteristics of the second religious dimension, complicating, confusing, and troubling Jesus’s divine mission (the male protagonist). Empowering Mary Magdalene in this way echoes the post-Vatican II tradition that recognizes her main role in Jesus’ mission as the “apostle of the Apostles.” Thus, Hamner’s argument on



the religious dimensions of female characters proves the duality of sexism and feminism in Scorsese's portrayal of Mary Magdalene in *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

From this, I argue that this duality is one of the most important elements of the movie that is present in order to fulfill Kazantzakis' novel plot. Portraying Mary Magdalene as a prostitute and as an active sexual being with all the connotations this entails is necessary to meet the movie's inner theological storyline: exploring Jesus' humanity. Matthew S. Rindge's thesis around Jesus' redemptive journey is useful to demonstrate this: first, Rindge argues that Jesus needs to accept his humanity, which involves accepting his sexuality through bedding Mary Magdalene; second, that Jesus needs to mend the pain inflicted on Mary Magdalene that led her to become a prostitute after his rejection by marrying her; and finally that Jesus needs to engage in a sexual activity with Mary Magdalene to confront his cowardice and fear. These three elements are indispensable steps in his redemptive journey in order to accept his humanity, be able to go back to the cross, die there, and accomplish his divine mission. Thus, I maintain that Mary Magdalene's prostitution, sexuality, and even sin are necessary elements in this exploration of Jesus' humanity, making Scorsese's Mary Magdalene a crucial part of Jesus' redemptive and divine role. This forces Scorsese to create a character that maintains a dichotomy between sexuality, sin, and prostitution versus penitence, chastity, and devotion, incorporating sexism and feminism.

As a final consideration, I recognize that Scorsese's decision to portray Mary Magdalene as a prostitute falls into the sexist pre-Vatican II tradition around this figure that existed since the times of Gregory the Great in the sixth century, which contributes to perpetuating the negative myth around Mary Magdalene. However, the feminist elements Scorsese and Hershey incorporate in the movie present an unconventional Mary Magdalene that also follows the post-Vatican II tradition, which restores her image found in the Gospels as the "apostle of the Apostles."

- <sup>1</sup> Pamela Thimmes, “Memory and Re-Vision: Mary Magdalene Research since 1975,” *Currents in Research* 5 (1998): 196–97.
- <sup>2</sup> Jason Sturdevant et al., “Mary Magdalene,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 1207-8.
- <sup>3</sup> Anthony Le Donne, “Did Jesus Befriend Sex Workers?,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 20, no. 3 (2022): 152.
- <sup>4</sup> Le Donne, “Did Jesus Befriend Sex Workers?,” 152.
- <sup>5</sup> For a full explanation on Ephraim the Syrian and Mary Magdalene see Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, “Ephraim the Syrian, Homily on Our Lord, #47,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 326–28.; and Peter Ketter, *The Magdalene Question*, trans. H. C. Koehler (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1935).
- <sup>6</sup> Thimmes, “Memory and Re-Vision: Mary Magdalene Research since 1975,” 221.
- <sup>7</sup> See “Homily 33” in Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. Dom David Hurst OSB (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> Sturdevant et al., “Mary Magdalene,” 1209-10.
- <sup>9</sup> Thimmes, “Memory and Re-Vision: Mary Magdalene Research since 1975,” 220–21.
- <sup>10</sup> Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Reconstructing ‘Real’ Women From Gospel Literature: The Case of Mary Magdalene,” in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105.
- <sup>11</sup> Sturdevant et al., 1210.
- <sup>12</sup> Arthur Roche, “Apostle of the Apostles,” Decree on the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, June 3, 2016. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, The Holy See. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/articolo-roche-maddalena\\_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/articolo-roche-maddalena_en.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, sec. 16, Apostolic Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year, August 15, 1988. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html)
- <sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, sec. 16.
- <sup>15</sup> Roche, “Apostle of the Apostles.”
- <sup>16</sup> Roche, “Apostle of the Apostles.”
- <sup>17</sup> William R. Telford, “Jesus and Women in Fiction and Film,” in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-Viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, vol. 43, Biblical Interpretation Series (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2000), 377–78.
- <sup>18</sup> Lucy Bolton, “Beautiful Penitent Whore: The Desecrated Celebrity of Mary Magdalene,” *Celebrity Studies* 11, no. 1 (2020): 31–32.
- <sup>19</sup> Adele Reinhartz, “Mary Magdalene,” in *Jesus of Hollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 148.
- <sup>20</sup> Caroline Stichele Vander, “Lovers or (Just) Friends? Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John and in Film,” in *The Ties That Bind: Negotiating Relationships in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, Contexts, and Reception History*, ed. Esther Kobel, Jo-Ann A. Brant, and Meredith J. C. Warren, Library of New Testament Studies 660 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 167–69.
- <sup>21</sup> Reinhartz, “Mary Magdalene,” 148.
- <sup>22</sup> Reinhartz, “Mary Magdalene,” 148-9.
- <sup>23</sup> Vincent LoBrutto, *Martin Scorsese: A Biography* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008), 26.
- <sup>24</sup> Scorsese recently announced a new film about Jesus that will begin filming later in 2024. See: Glenn Whipp, “For Martin Scorsese, It’s All about Forgiveness,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 2024, sec. Awards, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/awards/story/2024-01-08/martin-scorsese-killers-of-the-flower-moon-new-jesus-film>.
- <sup>25</sup> Peter Malone, “The Jesus Films: The 1980s,” in *Screen Jesus: Portrayals of Christ in Television and Film* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 114–15.
- <sup>26</sup> Lloyd Baugh, “Martin Scorsese’s The Last Temptation of Christ: A Critical Reassessment of Its Sources, Its Theological Problems, and Its Impact on the Public,” in *Scandalizing Jesus? Kazantzakis’s the Last Temptation of Christ Fifty Years On*, ed. Darren J. N. Middleton (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2005), 174–75.

- <sup>27</sup> Joan E. Taylor, "Mary Magdalene in Film: Response JSHJ," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 20, no. 3 (2022): 205.
- <sup>28</sup> Malone, "The Jesus Films: The 1980s," 119.
- <sup>29</sup> Baugh, "Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ: A Critical Reassessment of Its Sources, Its Theological Problems, and Its Impact on the Public," 183.
- <sup>30</sup> Matthew S. Rindge, "Redeeming Mary, Redeeming Jesus: Mary Magdalene in The Last Temptation of Christ," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 20, no. 3 (2022): 174.
- <sup>31</sup> Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," in *Scorsese and Religion*, ed. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 163.
- <sup>32</sup> Burnette-Bletsch, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," 164.
- <sup>33</sup> Burnette-Bletsch, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," 163.
- <sup>34</sup> Tammie Kennedy, "(Re)Presenting Mary Magdalene: A Feminist Reading of The Last Temptation of Christ," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 9 (2005): Sec. 2; Sec. 4; Sec. 25.
- <sup>35</sup> Bolton, "Beautiful Penitent Whore," 31.
- <sup>36</sup> Burnette-Bletsch, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," 163.
- <sup>37</sup> Melanie Jane Wright, "The Celluloid Brother: Imag(in)Ing Woman in The Last Temptation of Christ." Edited by Christine E. Joynes and Christopher Rowland. In *From the Margins: Women of the New Testament and Their Afterlives* 2 (2009): 70.
- <sup>38</sup> Jane Schaberg, "Fast Forwarding to the Magdalene," *Semeia* 74 (1996): 38.
- <sup>39</sup> Kennedy, "(Re)Presenting Mary Magdalene," Sec. 14; Sec. 17.
- <sup>40</sup> Wright, "The Celluloid Brother: Imag(in)Ing Woman in The Last Temptation of Christ," 69.
- <sup>41</sup> Wright, 77.
- <sup>42</sup> Wright, "The Celluloid Brother: Imag(in)Ing Woman in The Last Temptation of Christ," 75.
- <sup>43</sup> Wright, 75.
- <sup>44</sup> Telford, "Jesus and Women in Fiction and Film," 388.
- <sup>45</sup> Burnette-Bletsch, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," 163.
- <sup>46</sup> Baugh, "Martin Scorsese's The Last Temptation of Christ: A Critical Reassessment of Its Sources, Its Theological Problems, and Its Impact on the Public," 179.
- <sup>47</sup> Wright, 73.
- <sup>48</sup> See also arguments in favor of this patriarchal binaries in Burnette-Bletsch, "The Last Temptation of Christ: Scorsese's Jesus among Ordinary Saints," 163.
- <sup>49</sup> Kennedy, "(Re)Presenting Mary Magdalene," Sec. 25.
- <sup>50</sup> Wright, "The Celluloid Brother: Imag(in)Ing Woman in The Last Temptation of Christ," 73.
- <sup>51</sup> Telford, "Jesus and Women in Fiction and Film," 387.
- <sup>52</sup> Rindge, "Redeeming Mary, Redeeming Jesus," 172.
- <sup>53</sup> Mary Pat Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey* (New York: Thunder Mounth's Press, 1996), 205.
- <sup>54</sup> Kelly, *Martin Scorsese: A Journey*, 224–25.
- <sup>55</sup> Kennedy, "(Re)Presenting Mary Magdalene," Sec. 8.
- <sup>56</sup> Rindge, "Redeeming Mary, Redeeming Jesus," 171.
- <sup>57</sup> Richard Walsh, "Magdalene Response," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 20, no. 3 (2022): 212.
- <sup>58</sup> Rindge, "Redeeming Mary, Redeeming Jesus," 171–3.
- <sup>59</sup> Rindge, 174.
- <sup>60</sup> Rindge, 174–75.
- <sup>61</sup> Rindge, 175–76.
- <sup>62</sup> Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. P. A. Bien (New York: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1960), 14.
- <sup>63</sup> Rindge, 176.
- <sup>64</sup> Rindge, "Redeeming Mary, Redeeming Jesus," 177.
- <sup>65</sup> Rindge, 176.
- <sup>66</sup> Rindge, "Redeeming Mary, Redeeming Jesus," 173.
- <sup>67</sup> M. Gail Hamner, "Scorsese as a Critic of Modernity: The Woman Question," in *Scorsese and Religion*, ed. Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 110.
- <sup>68</sup> Hamner, "Scorsese as a Critic of Modernity: The Woman Question," 145.

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