WHEN THE SAINTS…

20TH of JULY BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS

22ND of JULY MARY MAGDALENE

23RD of July BRIDGET of SWEDEM

BARTOLOME de las CASAS [1484-1566] was born in Madrid of an impoverished family, and in 15002 he and his father immigrated to Hispaniola, now the largest Caribbean island shared between Haiti in the west and the Dominican Republic on the eastern side. At the time the whole island was a Spanish colony; in fact Hispaniola was where Columbus first landed.

One of the ways the Spanish administered their conquered territories was by the ‘encomienda’ grant system, whereby a piece of land and its people was assigned to a colonist, whose responsibility it was, in theory, to look after the people’s needs and teach them the Catholic faith, in exchange for tributes of gold, or other commodities such as fruit, or work. In reality the Indians had no choice in the matter, and in practice what happened was that many of them were worked to death, underfed and died of European diseases for which they had no exposure immunity. An encomienda was, in fact, a slave labour camp.

Bartolome was part of this system for some time before his conversion. He joined his father in slave raids among the indigenous communities, and was granted an encomienda himself; in fact he was one of the signatories in to a successful petition to expel the Dominicans who had preached against the system and its cruelties, and had denied communion to encomenderos unless they repented their sins.

Bartolome became a priest in 1510. In 1513, after participating in the Spanish invasion of Cuba, he became sickened by its violence and cruelty and in 1515, whilst reading Ecclesiasticus, he experienced a total change of heart, and subsequently gave up his estate and released his Indians: commencing at this point, his life-long campaign to Spanish royalty to end the encomienda system and to give native Caribbean Indians their rights as free human beings.

It’s important to stress that, at this point, Bartolome was not against slavery as such, but that, in fact, at one point which he bitterly regretted in later life, he had actually advocated the use of Africans as opposed to Indians as slaves, claiming that they were hardier, which, because of their greater exposure to European diseases, they probably were. By the end of his life, however, he had gone the whole hog and become a fully-fledged anti-slavery campaigner.

All of Bartolome’s campaigns met with virulent opposition from those whose livelihoods and profit margins were threatened by the possible loss of the system, including churchmen and absentee bishops, often living at home in Spain.

Much of his opposition came from the Franciscans, who had taken to baptising Indians in droves willy-nilly. Bartolome insisted that such forced conversions were invalid, and that converts needed to be able to understand the faith to which they were offering their lives. There was no question in his mind but that they SHOULD be converted: the crux of his campaign was that the Indians were being killed off before they had the chance to convert properly and save their souls[!] He was, after all, a man of his time.

Bartolome made many journeys to and from Spain, to pursue his project, and at first three Hieronymite monks, whom he had chosen, were sent over to govern the territory, but when Bartolome caught up with them, at last, it became clear that they had had to back-pedal in the face of united resistance from the encomenderos.

Eventually he got permission to set up a small colony in Venezuela along the more liberal lines he had advocated; but it became impossible to raise the necessary sum because of a paucity of investors, so that the project began at a disadvantage, and, when other slave raiders continually attacked the settlement, the few Indians left turned on Bartolome’s men and massacred them, leaving Bartolome desolated and broke.

Now, in 1522, he returned to Spain and took up theology studies at the influential Salamanca University, and the following year, he joined the Dominicans, whose preaching had assisted in converting him from his ways.

In time he was named ‘Protector of the Indians,’ which empowered him to settle native disputes to the best of his judgement, according to their own customs rather than Spanish law; and ‘Protector of the Indians’ is the title he received at his canonisation.

As his powerbase grew so did the ferocity of opposition to his campaigns, which centred, over the years, in Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Guatemala, as well as back in Spain.

In 1544 he was made Bishop of Chiapas, where he remained for only a few years before having to return to Spain to take part in debates organised by Franciscans, who had opposed him root and branch and claimed that, because of their inhuman religious rituals, Indians were subhuman, and therefore in need of Spanish rule and supervision. The result of the debate was inconclusive, which should astonish us now, but Charles V had his hands full, being Holy Roman Emperor as well as King of Spain, and he simply didn’t follow through, although there were , at least, some legislative changes which were, however, very largely ignored back in the Americas.

Bartolome wrote several books, the best-known being an account of the destruction of the Caribbean Indians, and in later life he retired to a monastery where he died in 1566.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

The calumny that MARY MAGDALENE was a prostitute was thrown out by the Vatican in 1969. It had been assumed that she was the ‘sinful’ woman who anointed Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee [Luke ch7.] At the beginning of the following chapter Luke names Mary among the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, as having been healed of seven demons. This, in itself, may be significant because Luke seems to be emphasising the extraordinary nature of this particular miracle.

The ‘Three Maries’ comprise the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whose ‘case’ comes up next week. This is particularly confusing if people cling to the notion that it was Mary Magdalene who anointed Jesus in Luke ch7, because John relates that Mary of Bethany anointed him at a dinner given after the raising of Lazarus [ch12], so we really need to hold onto the thought that Luke doesn’t name the ‘sinful woman’ in ch7, and whoever she may have been, she was certainly not Mary Magdalene.

The one thing universally celebrated of Mary is that she is ‘Apostle to the apostles; bringing the first news of Jesus’ resurrection to the 11, holed up in abject fear and despair; and receiving Jesus’ commission to meet him in Galilee. The most dramatic account of this occurs in John ch20, when Mary mistakes the partly ascended Jesus for the gardener, but all four Gospels carry the account of Mary, accompanied in Mat ch28 vv1-10, and named at Luke ch24 v10 among the women who had witnessed the burial and had waited through the Sabbath to anoint the body.

Mary Magdalene Is also named in the Gospels as having been present both at the crucifixion and as witness to the burial of Jesus by joseph of Arimathea. It seems abundantly clear, then, that, whatever physical, mental or spiritual condition Mary may have been healed of by Jesus, by the time of the passion, she must have been sufficiently grounded in recovery to have withstood these horrors, whilst being able to give and receive support from the other women in attendance, which is more than most of the disciples were able to do.

As has already been mentioned, there seems to be something significant about Mary’s ‘seven demons,’ and if you recall Jesus’ saying about seven demons worse than the original, who might fill a vacuum left by the expulsion of the first, we can imagine that Mary’s condition may have been of the gravest, for all that the canonic Gospels tell us nothing of its nature.

Whatever nonsense has been written about the relationship between Mary and Jesus what the Gospels, alone, tell us is that Mary must have been extraordinarily attached to Jesus. The same is true, also, of Mary of Bethany, whose jar of spikenard, with which she anointed Jesus, is a perfume derived from a plant grown only in India, and the probability that it represented her potential dowry has been put forward convincingly. All that this tells us is what we already know; that Jesus possessed the power to attract other people, be they women or men, and that if a generation obsessed with sex seeks proof that Jesus shared this obsession, it will search in vain for it in the Gospels.

Enter the Rev Dr Cynthia Bourgeault, a contemplative, retreat leader and Episcopalian priest! Her book, ‘The Meaning of Mary Magdalene’ is worth reading, even if you don’t go all the way with her thesis, which is that, quite regardless of any erotic relations that may or may not have existed between Mary and Jesus, Mary becomes Jesus ‘soul-mate.’

Good feminist as she is, Cynthia downplays Luke’s seven demons, as being the only insinuation in the whole of the New Testament that Mary was somehow ‘flaky,’ and therefore unreliable and less than… whereas my own take on this is that, on the contrary, Mary’s brokenness, in whatever form it may have taken, provided Jesus with an opportunity to impart a concomitant strength and grace to her situation. Notwithstanding, the end result was the same.

Cynthia quotes G K Chesterton, who once said: ‘Christianity hasn’t failed; it just hasn’t been tried yet.’ She states, undeniably, that

* Christian doctrine as we have it in most churches, is more the result of power politics than it is of anything Jesus might have intended,
* That the Evangelists largely chose to overlook the part played in Jesus’ ministry by women
* And that Christian doctrine has been shaped very largely by monks.

Something else Cynthia Bourgeault points up is that far too much emphasis has been traditionally placed on the 12 disciples, again, partly at the expense of the important role played by women in the development of the Jesus movement. At the beginning of Acts it is stated that there were 120 believers, and this, presumably, after the news of Jesus’ resurrection had spread. When, in the hiatus between the ‘ascension’ and the descent of the spirit, Peter found it necessary to fill the gap left by Judas in the 12, it becomes clear that there were others who had been with Jesus from the beginning, to say nothing of the 72 whom he had sent out in pairs: nor the detachment of faithful selfless women who supported Jesus with their own means. There was, evidently, a far wider caucus of disciples than the 12, most of whom, in any case, disappear from history entirely.

So what does this have to do with Mary Magdalene? Cynthia sees her as Jesus’ principal soul-mate; somebody ready, willing and able to offer and receive whatever might be the utmost in self-emptying, ‘kenotic’ love possible between two human beings. What Jesus means by ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ is not: ‘love… as much as…’ but ‘love your neighbour as though your neighbour WERE yourself.’

The idea of ‘kenosis,’ self-emptying, was around in protestant circles for a while in C19, and has reappeared occasionally since. It denotes the idea that, in order to live on truly equal terms with humans, Jesus necessarily needed to forswear aspects of his divine nature; attributes such as omniscience, for example. Cynthia uses the term in the same sense that Paul does in the famous hymn in Phil ch2 v8ff; that Jesus ‘emptied himself … and took the form of a slave…’ There would be major inconsistencies in Jesus’ life and ministry had he come to ‘empty himself’ in love for humanity in general, without at least a willingness to bestow this unlimited love on every individual willing and able to accept it. Cynthia’s thesis is that Mary Magdalene became the willing vessel, and one who was able to reciprocate this kind of agapeic love to the best of her endeavours.

Christians have objected to the idea that Jesus may have had an erotic relationship with Mary on the grounds that

* This would have made him a sinner
* If he loved one person more than the rest, he couldn’t have loved all of us equally
* That marriage would have distracted him from his ministry as a whole.

The only one of these objections worth dealing with is the second. We know, don’t we, that there were 12 disciples, and an inner circle of James, John and Peter: we also know that there was a disciple ‘whom Jesus loved,’ whom most of us have assumed to have been John. The reality is that Jesus seems to have loved and nurtured those around him according to their potential for growth, or for their various individual needs. We find the same generosity and attention to the needs of the individual in the resurrection appearances.

As for the first of these objections, while erotic passion could have been very real between two persons who loved each other in this uninhibitedly self-giving and intimate way, and while such natural and God-given feelings may be appropriate in theological terms, another, and possibly over-riding moral consideration may have been that, knowing how Jesus’ ministry was likely to end, both parties may well have concluded that marriage and the fulfilment of these natural desires may have been inadvisable.

If we’re looking for a place in the bible where the whole business of erotic love is handled most beautifully and most appropriately it’s ‘The Song of Songs,’ which has also been the ground of much misunderstanding and debate by over-pious men who perhaps take the same view of Eros as the desert fathers and mediaeval theologians and mystics: St Bernard of Clairvaux, not known for liberality or tolerance, spent time writing no less than 84 sermons on the Song. There is a spirituality of Eros which is not, however, evident among the prophets; least of all Ezekiel, whose misogyny enters the realms of pathology in chapters 16 and 23. At one level The Song is thoroughly and supremely erotic: at a deeper level Jewish religious symbolism is discernible by experts in the field. Where Franciscan spirituality is so valuable is that, whilst fostering a deep love and reverence for the whole of creation, it discourages the desire for possession.

Something a close reading of the Gospels makes clear is that neither Jesus nor those around him seem to have suffered any inhibitions regarding touch, other than in the case of skin disease referred to everywhere as leprosy. Jesus heals sensory-deprived individuals with his saliva; he takes a blind man by the hand; he takes children into his arms and post-resurrection encounters with Mary would seem to indicate that in normal circumstances touch, and even affection, would have been customary, and ‘safe.’

While Cynthia Bourgeault draws on some of the so-called ‘gnostic gospels’ for her conclusions, ultimately there exists sufficient evidence either direct or indirect from the canonic caucus to conclude that Mary Magdalene is a very special saint; ‘Apostle to the apostles,’ and a thoroughly loyal and devoted friend to Jesus: and that there is enough support in the mainstream of tradition to validate the outline, at least, of Cynthia Bourgealt’s thesis that Mary was able to bring to Jesus a focus for the optimum possible exchange of agapeic, mutually self-emptying love. If this is true, we should surely be venerating Mary Magdalene as Jesus’ earthly soul-mate as well.

**\*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\* \*\*\***

BRIDGET of SWEDEN – BIRGITE - [1303-73] was recently declared one of the six patron saints of Europe.

There is a detailed account of her life and achievements, with comment and plenty of art illustrations at Wikipedia.

Her two major sets of prayers are spoken on two separate films on YouTube and a more concise account of her life and achievements is to be found on Franciscan Media, as she became a member of the third order in later life.