

WHO IS MAGDALENE OF CANOSSA?

When I was a student of St Anthony's Convent, in both primary and secondary schools, I heard about Magdalene of Canossa as the Foundress of the Canossian Sisters, the compelling story of her early years, but nothing much more than that.

Of course, the annual school magazine was titled "*The Magdalenian*" and there was a social services club called the "*Magdalene League*" with activities similar to those of St. Vincent de Paul Society. No wonder then, that she may be confused with the Magdalene figure in the Gospels identified as a loyal follower of Jesus.

Magdalene of Canossa was more than a devoted Christian. She was a bold and astute pioneer in establishing the apostolic model of religious life in nineteenth-century Italy, laying down her vision of education for the poor and the human promotion of the common people, through pastoral assistance, catechesis and spiritual exercises. She achieved all this, not as a well-planned blueprint, but through a gradual process of listening, searching, learning and discerning, starting with small steps before arriving at clearer convictions and profoundly wise principles.

I came to know Magdalene of Canossa better in the process of reading her numerous letters (she was a prolific writer at a time when manuscripts were arduously hand-written), her plans (revised numerous times), her rules and her memoirs. She is someone whom I came to discover, understand and love more in the process than in the final outcome. She is also a person who models for me how to find God in the midst of balancing family, work and prayer, changing plans to adapt to current realities and situations as these arise, and relating with compassion, sensitivity and graciousness to all sectors of society in her time.

This year the Canossian Brothers and Sisters celebrate the 250th anniversary of her birth (1774 – 2024), giving thanks for her life, her example, her legacy and her spirit. The Marchioness Magdalene Gabriella of Canossa was born on the evening of March 1, 1774, in Verona, the beautiful city of the Scaligeri family. Verona, the city romanticized by Shakespeare in his play "*Romeo and Juliet*", lies in north Italy, gaily spread out at the feet of gentle hills and crossed by the River Adige which flows amid its ancient palaces and monumental churches. Magdalene was the third child of the Marquis Ottavio and his twenty-year-old wife, Countess Teresa Szluha.

The family's first child was a girl, Laura. Their second was a boy who, unfortunately, did not survive. It was only after Magdalene, that the parents were blessed with another boy, Boniface, who would then carry on the family name. Two more girls followed, Rosa and Eleonora. But the bliss of the noble Canossa family did not last long.

When Magdalene was five, her father Ottavio died prematurely at the age of 38 years while seeking treatment for an ailment. He had served as an honorary chamberlain to the Empress Maria Teresa, acquiring a distinguished status for the Canossa family in Verona. Canossa Palace still stands regally today beside the Adige river.

After the Marquis' death, the atmosphere in the Canossa Palace, with two ageing uncles was rather stifling. It reached a point when the young 29-year-old mother of Magdalene could stand it no longer. She decided to leave and re-marry even when it meant being separated from her five dear children. Thus, at the age of seven, Magdalene and her siblings were practically orphans, under the guardianship of their Uncle Jerome. In a letter

written in November 1791, Magdalene revealed that that she had felt the call to become a nun since the age of five. It would appear that her father's death must have impacted her even at that young age.

Uncle Jerome engaged a Jesuit priest to tutor Boniface while Magdalene and her sisters were taught by a French governess, Madame Francesca Capron. Magdalene suffered at the hands of the governess who changed from an initial sympathy to a strong antipathy because she mistakenly thought that Magdalene was critical of her teaching style. Her sister Eleonora wrote later about this:

"The governess did not like Magdalene and exaggerated in criticising her faults. Magdalene bore this injustice and the severe punishments that accompanied it patiently. I have never heard a word of complaint from her. Instead she was heard excusing her (the governess) to our grand-uncle."

Magdalene grew up during the tumultuous period of the French Revolution paved by the populist ideologies of the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. She had everything she wanted materially in her palace, but she felt a strong attraction to prayer and attachment to God. In prayer, she felt strongly the call to the cloister which, at that time, was the only model of religious life. However, in spite of two attempts to try out life in a Carmelite convent, she had to accept the reality that she was not a suitable candidate for the cloistered life. She returned to the Canossa family to take on duties required in the household and to explore new avenues where she could serve her call.

During the period between leaving the Carmelite cloister and starting her new Institute, Magdalene received spiritual direction from a priest Don Libera, with whom she corresponded for almost ten years. It was Don Libera who encouraged her to write her "Memoirs" and to take small steps to try out her dream of an apostolic religious order. Abandoning her idea of becoming a cloistered nun and daring to move into the then unknown territory of being a contemplative in active ministry is a clear example of how Magdalene was prepared to adapt and move with the times.

At that time, Magdalene belonged to the Ladies of the Hospital, a group started by Don Pietro Leonardi in Verona in 1796. It was a great movement of voluntary service, involving priests and even the nobility. So many future founders and foundresses came from this group (Carlo Steeb, Gaspari, Bresciano, the Bishop Avogadro himself). It was among these that she also met Carolina Durini from Milan for the first time. The two ladies soon became best friends and kept up a vigorous correspondence between Verona and Milan. In a letter to Carolina, Magdalene revealed how she was drawn to serve God in the poor from the very start.

D. Pietro Leonardi, though the founder of this movement, moved out of it to start his Institute of Mercy. So too Magdalene to start hers. They found the flaws in this voluntary movement which was a kind of reaction to the experience of the French Revolution.

In 1799 she disclosed to Don Libera the "plan" she had for her institute, and added that she had been thinking of it for more than a year when she was in exile in Venice with her sisters, while the French occupied Verona and its surroundings.

Magdalene's dream of the three branches of charity in her new Institute also seemed to take place in Venice, probably around 1812.

Magdalene's first Plan B-6, though written when she had no experience as yet, is one to which she always referred and to which she tried to be faithful all her life.

She was inspired by the Rules of the Sisters of Francis de Sales. They were called the Visitation Sisters because they went out visiting the sick – the first apostolic congregation for women. At that time only the cloistered nuns were considered Religious. Later Francis de Sales faced a dilemma: either his Sisters were to choose to visit the sick and renounce being 'Religious' or vice versa.

St. Vincent de Paul instead, from the very beginning started a congregation of the Sisters of Charity. These had no religious habit and did not take perpetual vows. They dressed like the poor women of Paris. Magdalene was attracted to this model and even borrowed their name. Already in the Plan B-6, Magdalene proposed some innovations:

- a) Magdalene already planned two Institutes – one for men and one for women.
- b) She already envisaged the three branches of charity. It is interesting that she did not call the first branch 'school' but 'education', with the focus on the promotion and well-being of the whole person.
- c) For the second branch she visualised two groups: - those who, because of their work, could not attend the Parish Doctrine classes and those living far away from the Church (a form of giving 'missions' to them).
- d) The third branch involved work in the hospital for the sick.
- e) She insisted on 'unpaid service' in all the three works of charity.
- f) That is why she called her Institute the "Sons and Daughters of Charity".

After meeting with the Church authorities whom she consulted for her Plans, she changed her initial idea to work in the hospital and agreed to start "Charity Schools". This is yet another instance of how she was ready to let go of her initial attraction to minister to the sick and move into the area of educating the young and preparing them for life. However she never gave up the idea of the other two ministries. Later she would say that the Institute would not be complete without all three branches of charity.

Perhaps Don Libera was the only one who guessed the importance of Magdalene's Plan. He realised it was vast but encouraged her to start on a small scale, but never lose sight of the whole. As Magdalene's spiritual father, he ordered her to break off negotiations to start a Monastery and commanded her to dedicate herself to "*the other project*", that is, her "*dream*". Magdalene balanced her twin desires by telling her Sisters to be "*contemplatives*" within the house and "*apostles*" when they were out.

In Magdalene's view, the School of Charity is a place in which the Sisters share the love of the Lord with a patient and sacrificial love, capable of serving even in the absence of rewards or when results are late in coming. It is not only love that becomes service, but a service that – given the type of the persons being served - can endure the lack or the tardiness of results. She saw education as a means to resolve personal situations and social disorders. She in fact said: "*the conduct of one's whole life ordinarily depends on education*". She perceived teaching as a major way to enhance the dignity of the person, in particular of those whom nobody is interested in.

Another of her prophetic quotes which still rings true today is this. "*Education is the harvest that costs the most but which yields more fruit, for the conduct of one's whole life depends on the education one has received.*"

For Magdalene, education involves much more than just rote learning. Her pedagogy includes

- the care of the spirit - which corresponds to the area of interior motivation
- the formation to virtues - calls for formation of attitudes that are guided by right motivations

- respect for the systems and structures so as to move from convictions to service.

The novelty of her response lies in her capacity to move from the principle of assistance to that of human promotion. *“Among the various factors that led to the choice of the “branches of charity” it is certain that the principal criteria were the needs of the poor... but not so much at the social level, as the theological criteria where one is enabled to experience the greatest love... (Gianluigi Andolfo, in Magdalene of Canossa in the glory of the saints, Verona 1989, p. 164-165).*

It was only in 1808 that Magdalene was able to free herself from the commitments in the Canossa Palace household and move into the slum district of San Zeno in Verona where she initiated the first Charity school for poor girls. A visit to Verona to see the two contrasting neighbourhoods would reveal what a major lifestyle change this move must have implied for Magdalene.

Four years later in 1812, she opened another school in Venice, followed by Milan in 1816, Bergamo in 1820 and Trent in 1828. She was still negotiating with the church authorities to open one more school in Brescia in 1835 when her health gave way and she died on 10 April 1835 at her first convent in Verona.

It was fidelity to God alone and the search for his glory that led Magdalene, simultaneously, to seek prayer and contemplation and to be active in the three branches of charity: to be alone with God alone and animated to work for the Lord.

She was stunned by the revelation of how God comes to meet us, moved by his love. In Jesus, God draws near to us by exposing himself to humiliation, poverty, the lowest condition, to the point of being "stripped of everything except his love"; "he breathes nothing but charity".

It is the way proclaimed by Paul to the Philippians: "The divine Lord made himself obedient to death and death on the cross "and in the self-presentation that Jesus makes of himself to his apostles: the divine Saviour, despite being the Almighty and the Most High, appeared on earth for our sake, testified that he had come not to be served, but to serve"

It is the path that Magdalene follows by not limiting herself to bestowing charity on the poor from her position of the privileged and powerful, but by making herself the servant of the poor, exposing herself to become poor in order to serve the poor. Magdalene understood that she could not love the poor as a noble lady, but that the Crucified Lord had given her the honour and privilege of serving them.

There is every reason to celebrate the 250th birthday of Magdalene the Foundress of an active religious congregation that has spread globally and the legacy she has left behind to give a unique Canossian identity to those who belong to her vast family. Ad multos annos!