

The third of September is the feast day of two saints who have played significant roles in the development of Christianity. But only one of them is given the recognition they deserve / **By PHYLLIS ZAGANO**

A tale of two deacons

WHILE Pope Francis could easily raise the level of the 22 July liturgical celebration of Saint Mary Magdalene, apostle to the apostles, he will have a harder go at it if he tries to honour Saint Phoebe on 3 September. Mary Magdalene's day is now a major feast. Phoebe does not even have a liturgy.

Phoebe, you will recall, carried Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 16:1-2). Perhaps because Paul introduces Phoebe as a deacon, the passage is nowhere in the current lectionary. In fact, her day is not typically celebrated in Roman Catholicism. Phoebe has been listed as a saint on 3 September for as long as anyone can remember, and she remains in the current Roman Martyrology. Her day's liturgical status is not of a feast or a memorial but that of a "commemoration". She had some chance of liturgical recognition until 1969, when the Latin Church moved the memorial of Pope Saint Gregory the Great from 12 March, the date of his death in 604, to 3 September, the date in 590 that Gregory (a deacon himself) was consecrated pope.

IT WAS NOT a kind act toward women who are still hoping for more respect in the Church. Since then, 3 September has been an obligatory memorial for the pope who preached, in effect, that Mary Magdalene, who announced the resurrection, was a prostitute. In late September 592, in the fourth century Basilica of Saint Clement in Rome, Pope Gregory elaborated on the seven demons the Lord had cast out of Mary Magdalene's life, as attested to in Mark 16:9. Preaching on Luke 7:36-70, Gregory collapsed the penitent Mary in that Gospel with Jesus's patron, Mary of Magdala. As many scholars have demonstrated, while she may have suffered seven demons, Mary Magdalene was not the woman bathing Jesus's feet with her tears and anointing them.

Seven, of course, signifies completeness. The "demons" afflicting Mary Magdalene more probably denote physical or perhaps emotional troubles, as they do elsewhere in Scripture, not moral failings. It is more

likely that Mary Magdalene suffered some sort of depression, perhaps the residual effects of menopause, or of the death of her husband or of a child, or of a failure in her business endeavours. Hence, Jesus's "casting out of demons" would more clearly represent a physical and/or emotional cure as in his other healings, unconnected to the so-called seven deadly sins.

Gregory was convinced, however, of Mary Magdalene's fallen nature. "And what are these seven demons," he asked, "if not the universality of all vices? ... Mary had seven demons in her, for she was full of all vices." His words solidified Mary Magdalene's reputation as a "fallen woman," and she was depicted for centuries as a red-haired temptress. The slander may have been circulating already, but after Gregory's Homily 33 it was accepted as fact.

So, the Church celebrates Pope Gregory, demeaner of the woman who first saw the risen Lord, on the feast day of Saint Phoebe, another woman proclaimer named in Scripture. The third of September is recorded as Saint Phoebe's "birthday" – her date of death and birth into new life. Orthodox Churches celebrate the Divine Liturgy in her honour on that date, and join Eastern Catholic Churches, Anglicanism, and Lutheranism in maintaining 12 March as Gregory's memorial. Roman Catholicism leaves Phoebe out in the cold.

Why? The usual explanation is that, following the Second Vatican Council, various forces wanted to move obligatory memorials out of Lent, because the season automatically overtook them, making them optional. Such, it was said, could effectively cancel the memory and celebration of Gregory, well-known and well-revered in Rome. The Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar promulgated by

Pope Paul VI in 1969, state: "The Saints who have universal importance are celebrated in an obligatory way throughout the whole Church; other Saints are either inscribed in the calendar, but for optional celebration, or are left to be honoured by a particular Church, or nation, or religious family." Because Gregory was considered to have "universal importance", he effectively trumped Phoebe, the deacon.

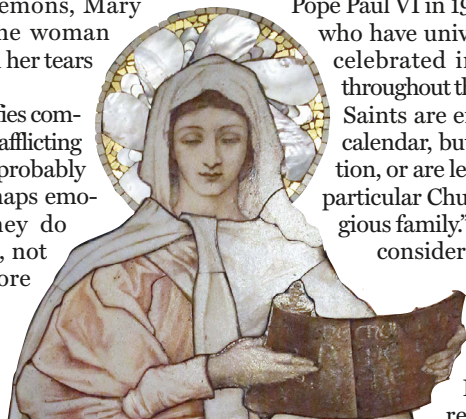
It appears that Phoebe, if she was recognised at all, only

appeared in the local liturgical calendar for the now-suppressed archdiocese of Corinth, or for Cenchræe, its now-forgotten port town. There is still a village at that location. Population: 238. But like Mary of Magdala, Phoebe of Cenchræe was a woman of stature and of means who had a prominent role as a follower of Christ. Paul introduces Phoebe as "our sister", indicating that she was a believing member of the community of Christians. He says she is a deacon of the church at Cenchræe. Finally, she is a *prostatis*, a patron or benefactor. The three titles combine to present a highly respected member of the community there, now entrusted with Paul's letter to the nascent community at Rome. Her patronage, one can assume, supported the efforts of the growing Church. With her status affirmed, she is the one not only chosen to carry Paul's letter to Rome, but most probably to read and interpret it once she gets to meet with the community there.

THE FACT THAT Phoebe is the only person in Scripture who positively holds the job title deacon (*diakonos*) within a church community is an important point in the ongoing battle about restoring women to the diaconate. Despite the translations that call her "minister" or "deaconess", Paul referred to her with the gender-neutral term "deacon", and connects her to an actual community. Certainly, there were others in the ancient Church who took up diaconal tasks. Many scholars point to Saint Stephen, one of the seven chosen by the apostles to serve the Church. But neither he nor the six others put forth by the assembly and appointed by the apostles through the laying on of hands is called deacon, as is Phoebe.

We might think of Phoebe as more like Mary Magdalene. Ancient customs allowed both men and women patrons to exercise leadership in both society and in the Church. We know, of course, that for the Church's first 250 years, most Christian assemblies and liturgies took place in homes, often in households headed by women. That Paul uses the term "deacon" to describe Phoebe links her to others whom he mentions in his undisputed letters. As John N. Collins points out, there are *diakonoi* of Christ (1 Timothy 4:6) and of God (2 Corinthians 6:4). Today, we are accustomed to hearing the pope referred to as "servant of the servants of God". It is ironic that it was Pope Gregory whose use of the term to refer to himself made it one automatically associated with the papacy: in fourteen years the deacon who became pope managed to malign the first witness to the resurrection, support the overriding import of service in the Church, and then, centuries after his death, elbow aside the celebration of the Church's first named deacon. Can the irony be overcome? May the Church – the people of God – remember Saint Phoebe on 3 September, even if officialdom refuses to.

Phyllis Zagano holds a research appointment at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, USA. Her most recent book is *Women: Icons of Christ* (Paulist, £20.95; Tablet price £18.85).



Detail from a mosaic of St Phoebe in Guy's Chapel, south London.

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