

# **What can we learn from Church History? Paradoxes and traditions**



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**JULY 21, 2013**

**PRESENTED IN LIVING STONE CHINESE  
ALLIANCE CHURCH**

# Theme



- Some religious ideas that are taken for granted may not be the original way. Traditions were added to the church when Christianity and culture interact with each other. We must make careful discernments.

# Paradoxes



- There are several paradoxes in the Catholic Church e.g.
  - Anti-Semitic sentiment vs. New Testament is a continuation of Old Testament
  - Nudity in many religious arts vs. restricted body exposure in church
  - Marriage is one of the 7 sacraments vs. sex is a taboo (virginity = holiness)

# Michelangelo: David



- A masterpiece of Renaissance sculpture (1501-1504).
- Originally commissioned to be positioned in Florence Cathedral (Duomo), the statue was instead placed in a public square when finished
- Now it is inside the Museum of Academia in Florence
- The head size is larger than normal for people to look up; the hand size is exaggerated to symbolize the power of David. **But something on the stature is wrong!**



# Florence Cathedral (Duomo)



# Ravenna Baptistery



# Ravenna Baptistery



# Close -up



- Jesus was baptized by John
- It is historically accurate that people were baptized naked.
- **But something on the painting is also wrong!**

# Break away from Judaism

- At first the Christian group was seen as a sect of Judaism
- The first century: Christians were looking for identity
- Over time the Jewish identity (**circumcision**) of Jesus and David was removed
- The inaccuracy in Christian arts was done on purpose.
- But this mentality leads to tragic consequences (downplaying OT, anti-Semitic movements)



# Anti-Semitic sentiment



- A long history of Anti-Semitic sentiment in Christian Europe
- Anti-Semitic is a misnomer
- “Semitic” is a branch of languages, not an ethnic group
- Both Hebrew and Arabic belong to Semitic
- Ghetto: originated from Venice
- 1492 Spanish expulsion
- German Holocaust in WWII



# Book of Judith



- The Book of Judith is included in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bible, but excluded by Jews and Protestants.
- Judith was a beautiful Jewish widow. She tempted the enemy general, Holofernes, and beheaded him in the camp.
- This heroine was courted by many men, but she remained unmarried for the rest of her life.

# Naked Judith



## Judith with the Head of Holofernes oil on wood

This picture, previously attributed to the Emilian artist Girolamo da Carpi, shows the strong influence of the artistic culture of Raffaello's followers, particularly in the figure of the woman. Judith, a young Hebrew, kills Holofernes, who is an enemy of her people. The story is narrated in the Bible (*Book of Judith*). The subject of Judith's deed is frequently represented, because it was interpreted as the triumph of virtue over sin.



PINACOTECA  
CAPITOLINA

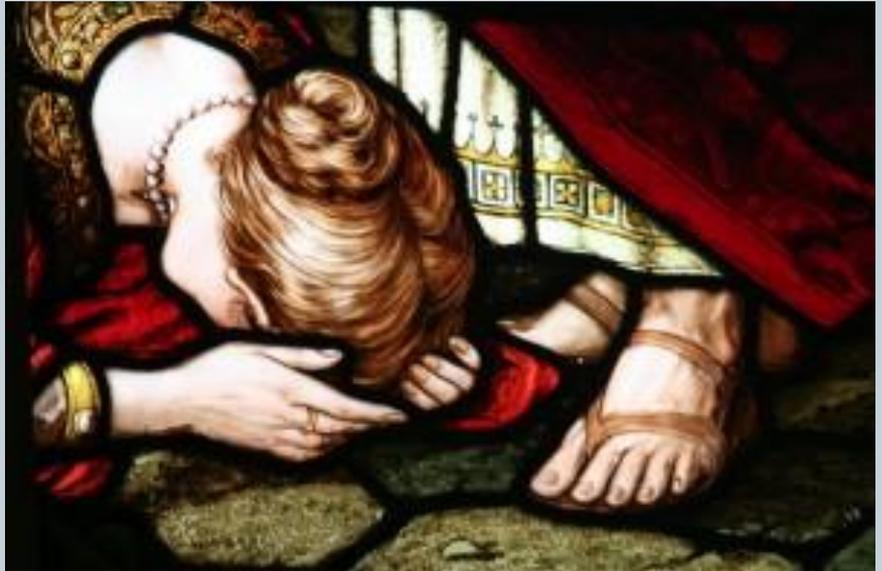
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# Mary Magdalene



- She is considered the second-most important woman in the New Testament after Virgin Mary.
- She traveled with Jesus and was present at Jesus' two most important moments: the crucifixion and the resurrection.
- She loved Jesus so much that she wiped his feet by her hair.



# Naked MM in the Louvre, Paris



**Gregor ERHART**

Ulm, vers 1470 - Augsbourg, 1540

**Sainte Marie Madeleine**

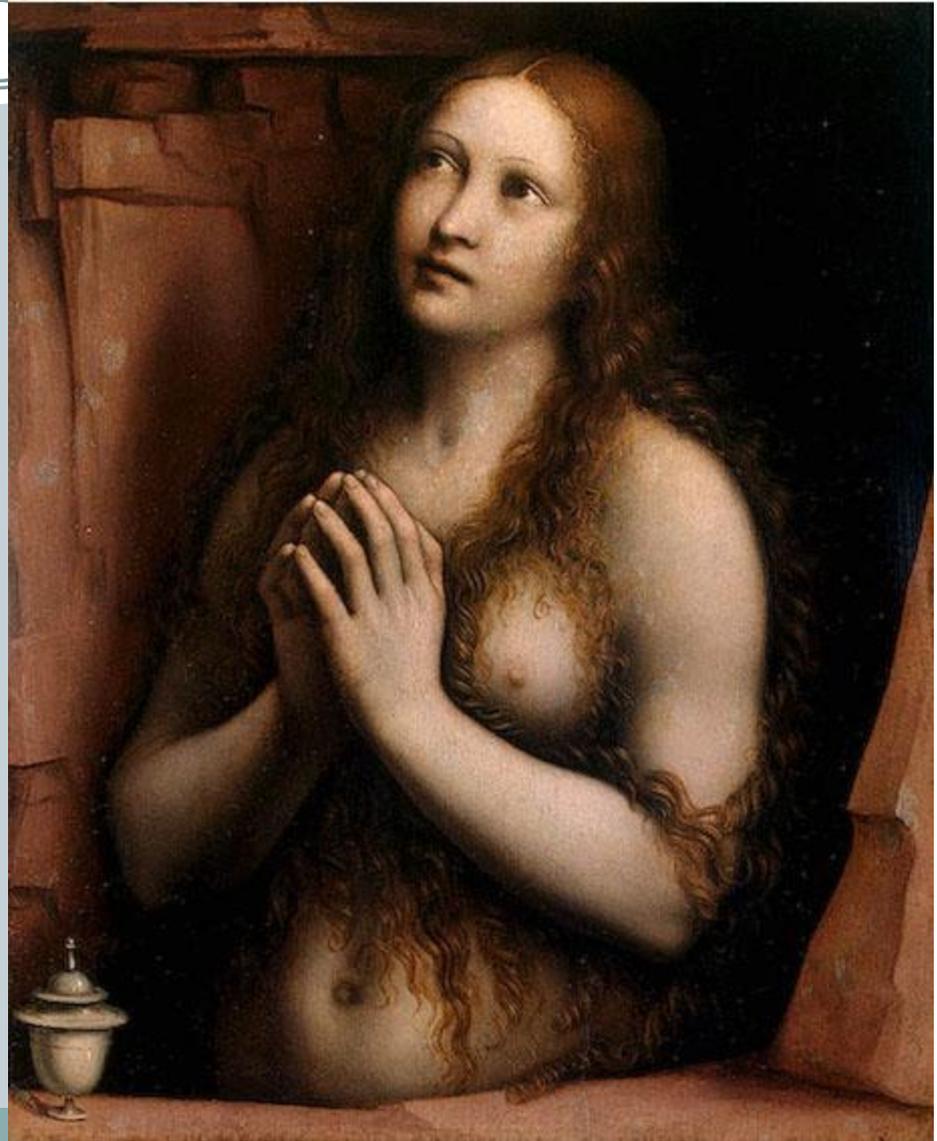
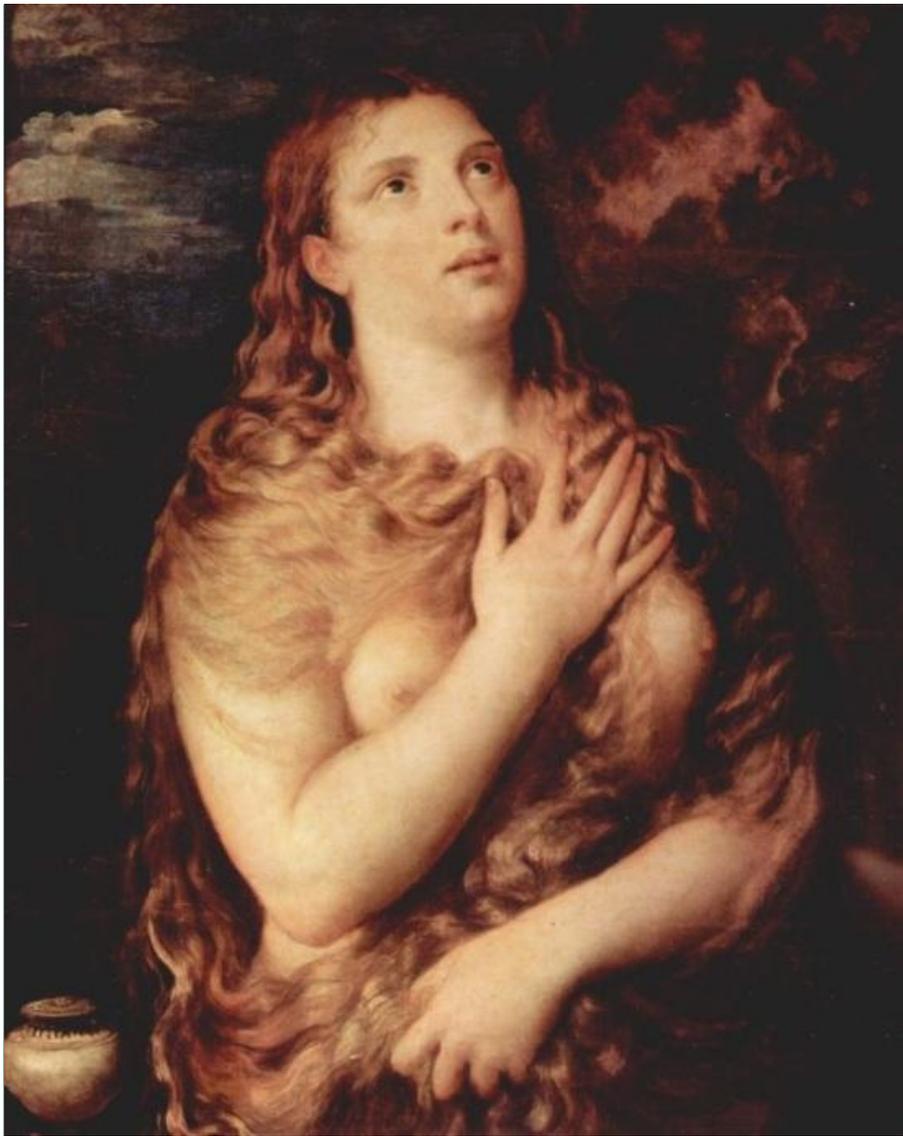
Vers 1515-1520

Tilleul, polychromie originale, terrasse  
et partie avant des pieds restituées au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle  
Provenant de l'église Sainte-Marie-Madeleine  
du couvent des Dominicains d'Augsbourg (?)

Comme sur la gravure de Dürer, la sainte,  
figurée nue, était entourée d'anges volants.  
La pécheresse repentie, qui vivait dans la grotte  
de la Sainte-Baume vêtue de ses seuls cheveux,  
était tous les jours transportée au Paradis par  
des anges, pour entendre un concert céleste. La  
sculpture était encastrée dans la voûte de l'église.

Collection Siegfried Lämmle ; acquisition en 1902 sur les arranges  
de M<sup>me</sup> Émile Louis Sévère née Laure Eugénie Declercq

R.F. 1328





# Mariology (virginity = holiness)



- The status of Mary was elevated over time
- Art in Vatican
- Mary was viewed as a co-redeemer, a crowned deity
- Mary is not holding baby Jesus; she is like a queen sitting behind Jesus.



# Crowned Mary



- At first Mary was not crowned in Catholic arts.
- Later the crown was added (look at the close-up)
- St. Maria Church in Rome



# Assumption of Mary



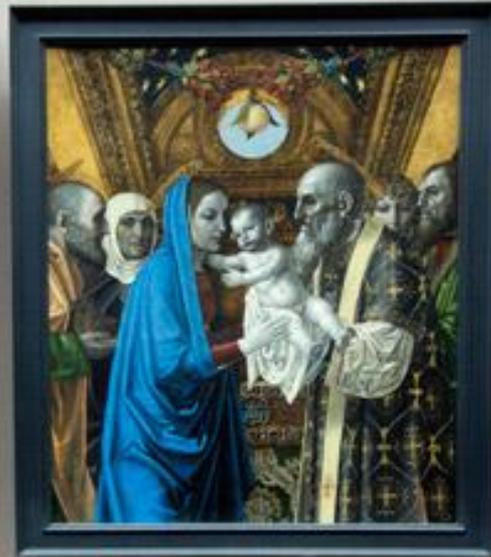
- Assumption of Mary was announced by Pope Pius XII in 1950
- The painting of Mary's natural death was covered

# virginity = holiness

- Mary was said to be a virgin throughout her life
- But what about Jesus's brothers?
- Joseph was portrayed as an old man. Jesus's brothers were said to be his half-brothers from Joseph's former wife.
- Sex is dirty. Mary must be a virgin to maintain her holiness. Catholic nuns must also be unmarried.
- St. Augustine: original sin is passed through sex (?)



# old Joseph



# Christianity and Culture

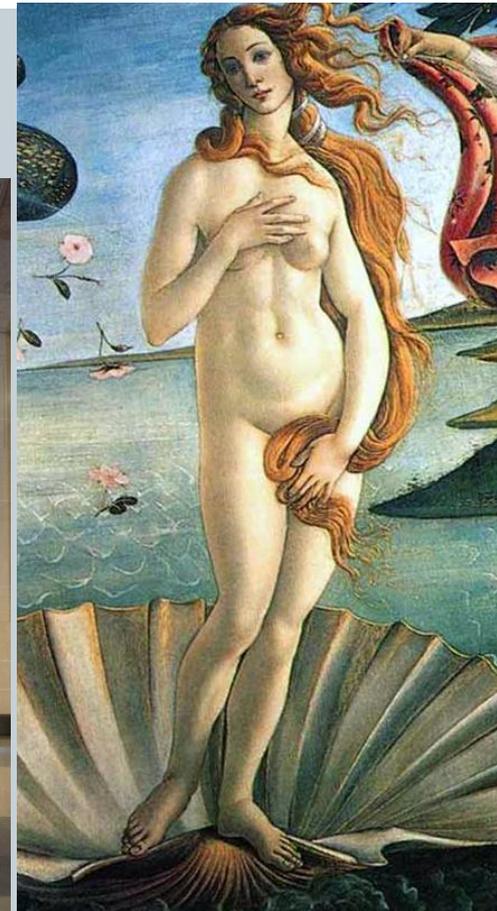


- Christianity was influenced by Greco-Roman culture
- Christians liked to co-opt the cultural trait of the Romans
  - Gospel
  - Christmas (12/25 is a Roman Festival)
  - DM (to the god of the underworld → to the Lord; add a Christian symbol: Fish, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior)



# Christianity and Culture

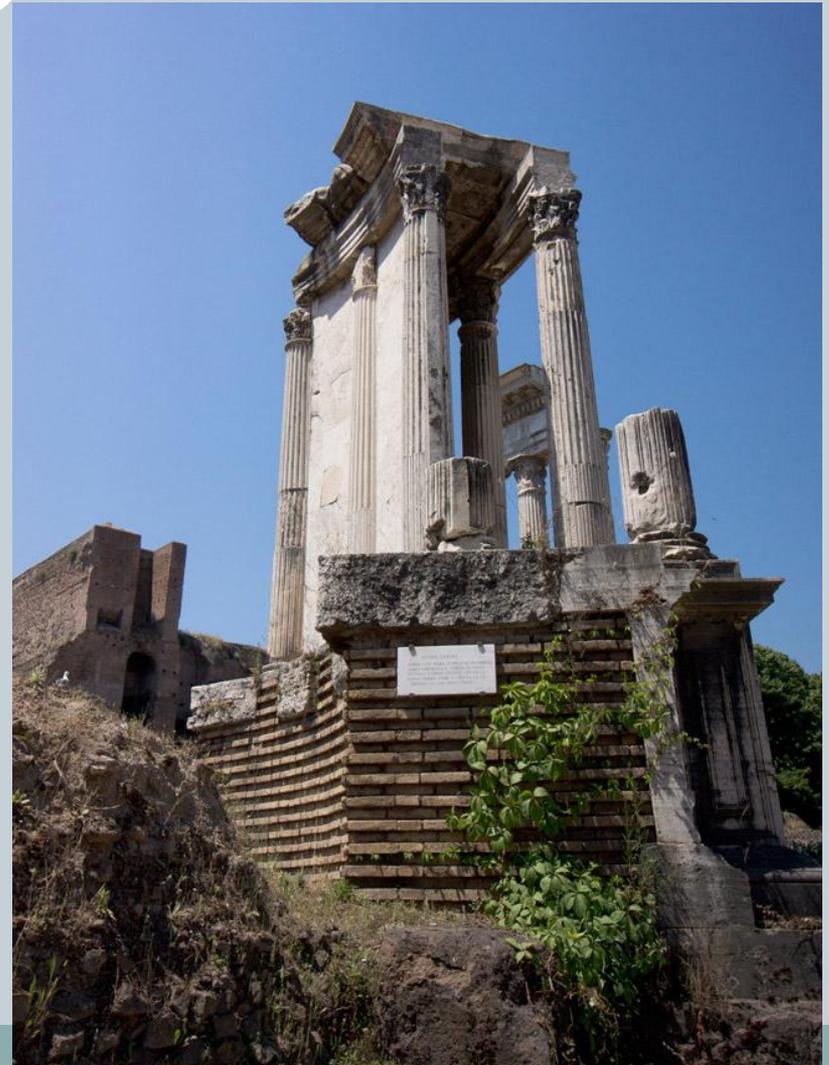
- Greeks and Romans see human bodies as the beautiful, ideal form → Nudity is seen in Christian arts.
- The image of this Mary Magdalene is comparable to that of **Venus**.
- The Birth of Venus: 1486 painting by Sandro Botticelli. Botticelli.
- Displayed at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.



# Christianity and Culture



- Greeks and Romans also equate virginity with holiness e.g. Medusa, Vestal virgins →
  - Mariology
  - nuns (abbesses)
- Temple of Vesta in Palatine, Rome (near Coliseum)



# Virgin of the sun



- Vestal virgins: Similar to the Virgin of the sun in Inca (Peru).
- Young girls of the nobility or of exceptional beauty were trained for four years to be the priestesses of the sun god.
- Machu Picchu is believed to be a place for worshipping the sun god.
- If someone had sex with a virgin of the sun, he would be thrown off a cliff, hung up to starve to death, or his hands and eyes would be cut out.



# *Machu Picchu*



# Vestal Virgins



- Vestal virgins were a group of Roman religious servants. This religious institution was established by Numa, the second King of Rome.
- After being chosen, the Vestals had to serve for thirty years.
- During their tenure, the Vestals had to keep their virginity, take care of the **eternal flame**, secure the sacred objects within the Temple of Vesta, and prepare materials for sacrifice.
- If the extinction of the eternal flame is caused by carelessness of a Vestal, she would be stripped naked and beaten by the Pontiff.

# Vestal Virgins



- The religious meaning of the eternal fame could be traced back to the history that the discovery of fire led to the development of civilizations.
- The Vestals were more than just clergywomen, but also they were *the embodiment of Roman society as a whole*. Because they were the brides of the state, any sexual relationship with them was considered incest.
- Cornelia was a Chief Vestal condemned to be buried alive for incest by Domitian in AD 90.

# Cautionary measures



- Many precautions were taken to keep their chastity.
- No man was allowed to approach the temple of Vestal at night; no man was allowed to step over the boundary of the Atrium.
- Even physicians had to stay away from the virgins, no matter how urgent the situation might be. If the virgin was very sick, she would be sent back to her parents for care. At home the behavior of the doctors was closely watched.
- Every detail of the virgin's life was monitored by secret informers.

# How were they chosen?



- Originally Vestals were chosen by the king. But during the era of the Republic and the Empire the selection was at the hand of **Pontifex Maximus**.
- Vestals were chosen when they were between six and ten years old. Both parents and the virgins had to be perfect.
- The number of the Vestals was limited to six only. There would not be any new selection until one of the virgins died.
- After being chosen their tie to the family was cut; the pontiff “took” the girl.
- As soon as the selection was finalized, the virgin was brought into the Atrium Vestae for inauguration.

# Summary



- Some religious ideas are paradoxical (e.g. the Hebrew heritage and anti-Semitic sentiment, nude religious arts and restrictions in body exposure, marriage is sacred but virginity is holy...etc.)
- The Catholic Church adopted some of these ideas from the Greco-Roman culture while intending to co-opt the culture.
- Today people take certain traditions for granted; we may think that some Christian ideas and practices are from the Bible, but we must carefully study their origins.