

## DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY AND THE COURAGE OF ST. MARY OF EGYPT

By Pia Sophia Chaudhari



Every year during Lent, we celebrate the Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt. St. Mary was only 12 years old she left her home and traveled to Alexandria, where she threw herself into wanton and “insatiable” sexual behavior for many years, “ensnaring many souls,” sinking deeper and deeper into depravity, until one day—upon attempting to enter a church—she experienced herself barred from entering by an invisible presence. She realized her sin, repented deeply, prayed to the Mother of God, was allowed to enter the church, and so began a new journey. Eventually, she took up life in the desert and there remained for many years until a spiritual father encountered her twice, whereupon she died after finally having received Holy Communion. In an oddly moving twist to the ending of the story as it has been passed down, Fr. Zosimas was assisted in burying her in the desert by a passing lion. Anyone who knows and loves Aslan of Narnia will, I’m sure, share my love of that little detail.

We enter into this stark and amazing story, in the midst of our Lenten journeys, which emphasizes not only the power of repentance but the battle between impurity and holiness. And yet, sometimes in ensuing discussions I feel left with a sense of a script for purity and piety (and possibly more than a touch of mistrust of feminine Eros) rather than having touched the depth and complexity of human experience. I think that if we look to this as a story of morality and ascetic struggle *for the sake of morality rather than existence itself*, we may actually risk missing the full and extraordinary magnitude of what may well have happened, and—perhaps

more poignantly—what still can happen in our own lives.

What is often lifted up in commentaries on this story, and indeed in the words ascribed to her, is the willing ‘wantonness’ of her sin, the stunning and absolute nature of her repentance, and then her courageous ascetic struggle in the wilderness. In and of themselves, these events are true to the story and highlight virtues to which of course we ought aspire. But I also wonder about what led her into her original state. What occurred in her childhood to bring her to a place of leaving home at 12 to move to a big city by herself? Was she a social outcast? Was she abused? Did she have family? What patterning had already taken place deep inside her? What sense of worth lived within her? What was she looking for in promiscuous behavior? Was her physical desire knotted up in a distorted search for a love and intimacy she had never known?

We never speak about her likely pain or her probable inner splits, but rather speak as though her will was free and malicious, ensnaring poor male souls wherever she went. But as a scholar of depth psychology, I do wonder about what patterns, what broken inner relationships, what complexes, what hungers drove her until in a moment of grace, an encounter with God, she sees herself (or as Jung might posit, her “Self”) truly and collapses. She recounts that she simply followed pilgrims to the church while in search of more victims. But as someone trained to listen for the acts of the unconscious, was the fact that it was a church truly irrelevant? We might posit that something in her psyche led her to the

church and at the door she was immediately confronted by the disconnect between what theologically we might see as the reality of God versus the reality she had created for herself, or between what Jungians would call Self and her persona/complexes. Such a stark disconnect, considered psychologically, would be terrifying—even paralyzing—when it first threatens to break in to awareness. It might feel like the end of the world or a deep void opening up. Another foot forward might just be impossible. But then she steps to the side and lets the truth of it all dawn on her. Something is working its way into consciousness. And then she begins to weep. So often this happens when in the clinical setting, we turn a good corner and suddenly see the dark points of the past thrown into relief by the clear light of the present. Tears herald the mourning required, of who we have been and where we have been, before the new which has arrived can take root and grow. No one said healing was easy.

If we emphasize only purity and impurity, we may miss the actual breath-taking beauty of what can and actually does happen when our own small realities encounter the greater Reality. As St. Maximus the Confessor stated, “Virtue exists for the sake of truth, but truth does not exist for the sake of virtue.” Such an encounter with truth is the beginning of *hope*—not because a sinner can be saved in a moralistic trope, but because an inner space opens up in the person that can change their whole existence, their whole experience of the world. It is the beginning of *freedom*, inextricably bound up in the experience of love. So while yes, she was barred by her sins, I would say something also broke through what I imagine to be a deep inner despair, and brought with it hope, which is why she could suddenly see her sin as sin. She stepped into that hope, and then spent the rest of her life fighting to keep that ground. She tells Fr. Zosimas of the torments she

has experienced in the desert. But demons are also not just concerned with morality; they attack our mode of existence, and steal joy and freedom at all levels, and they don’t give up easily, nor—from the psychological side—do complexes that drive us to act in ways we would rather not.

But as any psychoanalyst can tell you, once a different way has been glimpsed and even more, fully experienced, an all out revolution begins and—as my mentor Ann Ulanov used to say—it’s “blood and guts.” It’s messy. To see the new gain ground is nothing short of miraculous. It is truly a thing of beauty, a transformation only accomplished—as the ancient Christian alchemists used to say—“*Deo Concedente*.” To me, it makes her story all the more moving, not just as an icon of repentance in the way we often hear that word, but of love breaking through deeply patterned behavior and holding open the door to a different way, one she would have to fight body and soul, tooth and nail, to hold on to. Her experiences of God must have been very, very strong to effect such a radical *metanoia* and then sustain her for the ensuing battle with all the demons and complexes which would still be there in her psyche. The fight was on.

It is a moving story, a miraculous story, an utterly harrowing story, and one that I imagine as not only about sin and redemption, but also the deep healing of despair and isolation, an encounter with true love, and the lifelong struggle that such an initiatory encounter may set off in each of us as we strive become who we were born to be—creatures of desire made for communion with God and with each other. It is a story about love and the power of love, as are all the best stories. May St. Mary pray for us all this Lenten season in our own struggles for love and freedom, and may we take courage from her remarkable courage.