

Reflections on the Life of Mother Magdalen Williams (1941-2023)

By *Esther G. Juce*¹

Music was one of the fields in which Mother Magdalen excelled. For example, she was a brilliant pianist. I once witnessed her sight-reading a difficult piece. After having played only two measures of the music, she began adding in extra notes and chords without skipping a beat. She also had an angelic voice and an extensive knowledge of music in general. As well, Mother M. had a talent for setting and arranging music. Some of her work is still enjoyed at her previous parish, St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in Narol, Manitoba. Perhaps one of her lasting legacies was her anonymous transcription of the *Obikhod* Octoechos, her beloved “cheat-sheets,” to which many a frustrated choir director or singer have often turned.

“The nun” was a notorious punster. I lived on the fourth floor and she on the fifth of our apartment building. This was one light-hearted exchange:

I: “You’re always above me!”

She: “You’re always supporting me!”

I: “We’re taking this humour to a new level!”

She: “Well, when I try to make these jokes, they always come out flat!”

Of course, it was her spiritual life that most defined Mother Magdalen. While she had travelled through certain western Christian faith traditions, she was not ultimately at home until she entered the Orthodox Church.

¹ These reflections are based on a few thoughts that I shared at the Forty-Day Memorial after Mother Magdalen reposed, held on December the 12th, 2023.

The young Betty Williams' first exposure to Orthodoxy was in her experience of worship in Ethiopia while there with Crossroads International in 1964. The next inkling came when she watched the beginning of the 1965 epic film, *Dr. Zhivago*, which depicts a woman that is being buried in her wedding gown. The music, solemnity, and reverence of the Orthodox funeral service in the movie all made a deep impression on her. But these were only the beginnings.

While in her Roman Catholic cloister, "Sister Madeleine" had experienced some disequilibrium, but found solace in some Orthodox books that were in the possession of the Abess there, among them *The Orthodox Church* by Timothy Ware. Eventually she had to take leave of the cloister, returning to the refuge of her parents in Winnipeg in 1984.

It was then and there in the city of her childhood that "Betty" discovered the Orthodoxy. After having participated in only a few services and meeting certain key people, such as the then Fr. Seraphim Storheim who eventually became her spiritual father, she was smitten! She entered the catechumenate, being received into the Church in 1986. Nine years later, she was tonsured with the name Magdalen and came to fully realize her monastic vocation.

Mother Magdalen's love, humility, and pure joy of Christ's Kingdom were infectious; she was an inspiration and example to all. There were some spiritual giants that influenced her life, especially St. John of Kronstadt and St. Silouan the Athonite. She once quipped that if she had to jump out of a burning building, she would have the Bible under one arm, and either *My Life in Christ* by St. John of Kronstadt or *St. Silouan the Athonite* by St. Sophrony under the other! She said that she was glad that she never had to make that decision!

Mother Magdalen once shared with me her brief encounter with this same Fr. Sophrony when she visited his monastery in Essex, England shortly before her tonsure. She said that during the entire time of her stay, she remained in her room, too intimidated to come out. Then, on her last day, she took courage and ventured out into the garden. And whom did she meet on the path but the monk who later would come to be known as St. Sophrony of Essex. On that final day, their eyes met but for a few moments and no words were exchanged. But our

future nun Magdalen said that all that she could sense was this man's love and humility; she saw his holiness instantly.

As I said to all gathered at the Memorial that night, St. Sophrony admired the words of St. Silouan, who was later acknowledged to be a saint; and Mother Magdalen in turn recognized the sanctity of St. Sophrony, who in like manner was also glorified in the Church. Now, we, too, who have known Mother Magdalen are all well acquainted with *her* saintliness. So, it only goes to show, it takes one to know one!

Mother Magdalen's Life-Story

1941 Born in Calgary, AB, Elizabeth (Betty) Williams

She travelled by train with her mom, Bess Williams, to the Naval Base in Nova Scotia to join her dad, Owen Williams, during World War II.

1946–57 Lived in Winnipeg, MB

On the train ride home to Alberta after the war, her dad was offered a partnership in Winnipeg where the family settled down, and baby sister Roberta (Bobbie) was born in 1949.

1957 Became a member of the United Church of Canada

She grew up in the United Church. Her dad was the Sunday School superintendent and her mom was the organist. It was at this age of 16 that she formally joined the Church.

1957–60 Lived in Calgary, AB. Graduated from High School; completed ARCT (Associate of The Royal Conservatory of Music) in piano; taught music

While studying music with Western Canada's foremost piano teacher Gladys Egbert, she was one of the first young women to play at the new Jubilee Auditorium. While studying with the Internationally famous Boris Roubakine at the Banff School of Fine Arts, she performed a private recital for Queen Elizabeth during her 1959 Royal Visit to Canada.

1960-64 Attended University of Winnipeg (United College); completed B.A. (Hons.) majoring in English Literature; completed LMM (Licentiate of The Royal Conservatory of Music) in music; taught piano; went to Ethiopia

She travelled to Ethiopia with Operation Crossroads Africa (Crossroads International), an organization that sought to create a more equitable and sustainable world, with North Americans working in collaboration with locals to build a schoolhouse. She met with Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974.

1964-69 Studied Medieval English at University of London, England (Birkbeck College); converted to the Roman Catholic Church in 1965

She was awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship to study Honours English at the University of London. Her thesis project based on the life of Richard Rolle of Hampole, an English mystic and religious writer who left Oxford to become a hermit. This focus of study may have been the first indication of her interest in the contemplative life. While a student in London, she was invited to sing in the choir of a Catholic Church. What soon became evident was the desire to become not only a Catholic, but a cloistered nun.

During her student years in London, she had studied *Koine* (New Testament) Greek, and had at one point aspired to translate Scripture into a modern language.

1967-68 Taught High School in Winnipeg

Upon her return to Winnipeg, while developing plans to enter a cloistered Cistercian Monastery, she had the opportunity to teach music at a private Catholic girls' school, St. Mary's Academy.

1968 Entered the Cistercian monastery L'Abbaye de Nôtre Dame de l'Assomption, Rogersville, NB

1975 Took solemn profession as a Cistercian nun as Sister Madeleine

She spent fifteen years in the cloistered Cistercian monastery. The daily rituals of growing their own food, cooking, and cleaning were spent in silence. When talking was allowed, the sisters spoke only French.

1984-85 For health reasons, allowed a year outside the cloister in Winnipeg and Ottawa

Challenged to seek a new direction beyond the Roman Catholic world, a friend whom she had met in Cistercian circles, Rodney Ferris, entrusted her with a parcel that was to be given to an Orthodox Priest, Fr Seraphim Storheim, at the time, rector of Holy Trinity Orthodox Sobor. She arranged to meet him, and after attending Orthodox Vespers and then Divine Liturgy, quickly realized that Orthodox Christianity was what she had been searching for.

1985 Started attending services at Holy Trinity Sobor, 643 Manitoba Ave. in Winnipeg, MB. Asked to leave the Cistercian Order

1986 Received by Chrismation by Fr. Seraphim into the Orthodox Christian Church, Holy Trinity Sobor, Winnipeg, MB.

Her sponsor was Connie Kucharczyk, a long-time member of the Parish, and graduate of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York, and the Institute for Ecumenical Studies in Bossey, Switzerland.

1986-95 Taught music; did housekeeping; became more involved with the Parish.

During this time, still yearning for the contemplative life, she travelled extensively, visiting various monasteries in Europe and in America, including in 1990 visiting the monastery in Essex, England and meeting St. Sophrony of Essex.

1995 Became a Rasophore (Novice) by Archimandrite David Anthony (Edwards) under the Missionary Brotherhood of St. Silouan, in the Archdiocese of Canada, Orthodox Church in America, receiving the name Magdalen; became choir director at Holy Trinity Sobor, keeping that position until 2004.

1996 Tonsured a Stavrophore (Lesser Schema) by then Bishop Seraphim at Fair Haven, Johnstown, ON, Canada

Her sponsor to the Lesser Schema was Mother Dorofea (Mirochnitchenko).

2005 Became a member of St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, Narol, MB

She undertook the study of iconography, including studying under Vladislav Andrejev, founder of the Prosopon School of Iconography in New York; taking courses in Finland; and being mentored by Winnipeg iconographer, Vera Senchuk. Icon painting unleashed her creative spirit, as well as allowing opportunity for contemplation and prayer. She wrote the Deacons' Doors at St. Nicholas Orthodox Church in Narol', Manitoba, and some of the icons in the apse of Holy Trinity

Orthodox Sobor. Eventually her failing eyesight would not allow the intense focus required to do this work.

Her passion for etymology, her extensive training in English and *Koine* Greek, her fluency in French, and her exposure to Slavic languages, made her an exquisite editor, especially of religious and theological texts.

2017 Became a member of Holy Trinity Orthodox Sobor, English Language Community.

At the end, despite having serious eye and heart trouble, she was undaunted and was an inspiration and unfailing help to all her friends and acquaintances.

November 3, 2023 Reposed in the Lord in Winnipeg, MB, Canada

In her journey in the Lord, while she had desired to find a vocation within an Orthodox Christian monastic community, Mother Magdalen found solace in her solitude wherever she found herself, and to everyone that she met was a witness to the joy of Christ's Kingdom to the end of her days.

Limerick to St. Mary Magdalen

Out of her seven demons were cast.

Her Saviour she'd served in the past.

For Christ did she thirst!

He appeared to her first,

But in His Kingdom, she won't be the last!

Esther G. Juce is a parishioner at the St. Nicholas parish in Narol, MB, Canada.

