A certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary. (Luke 10:38-39)

Although doubted by most modern biblical “scholars” and somewhat obscured by the Novus Ordo Liturgy, there is no reason to doubt that St. Mary Magdalene is St. Mary of Bethany, the sister of Sts. Martha and Lazarus. Furthermore, she is the penitent woman described in Luke 7 who wept at the Lord’s feet and drying then with her hair anointed them with the rich perfume.

The key to recognizing the identity of St. Mary Magdalene as St. Mary of Bethany is to see that the Magdalene is the penitent woman. Knowing her to be the repentant sinner who anointed the Lord, we quickly recognize her as the sister of Sts. Martha and Lazarus.

St. Mary Magdalene is the penitent woman

The evidence of Scripture points to a connection between St. Mary Magdalene and the penitent woman. Immediately after relating the story of the conversion of the woman who had been known as sinner in the city, St. Luke tells us that a number of women followed the Lord, among whom was “Mary who is called Magdalen, out of whom seven devils were gone forth” (Luke 8:2). She is named first in the group and is the only one about whom information beyond simply her name is given.

Can anyone doubt that the penitent woman must have been known in the early Church? Is it at all likely, even on a human level, that after such a display of repentance and affection she would not follow after the Lord and minister to his needs? Can we really believe that the rest of her story would be entirely forgotten by the Evangelist? Not likely.

In order to preserve her dignity, St. Luke refrains from naming St. Mary Magdalene directly in the story of her repentance, but he makes the connection by introducing her in the verses immediately following and draws our attention by indicating that she is a woman who has repented from a life of sin as being freed from “seven demons” (representing the seven capital sins).
This is a technique common to the Gospels -- consider a few other examples. While Mark and Luke name the tax collector convert “Levi”, St. Matthew uses his more well-known name of “Matthew”. The two evangelists cover the shame of the apostle’s previous life, while St. Matthew states clearly that he had been a tax collector. Again, the other evangelists do not reveal the identity of the one who struck the high priest’s servants ear in the garden, but St. John names him as Peter – indeed, the Fourth Gospel relates many more details about St. Peter than any other, as John and Peter were very close (evidence from Acts of the Apostles). Thus, in concealing the past sinfulness of St. Mary Magdalene, St. Luke is doing something common to the gospel tradition.

The Saints and the Popes Say She is St. Mary Magdalene

The most significant papal approval of the tradition that St. Mary Magdalene is the penitent woman of Luke 7 comes from a sermon of St. Gregory the Great. As this is a sermon of a Roman Pontiff, it has the authority not only as being the words of a saint and Father of the Church, but also as belonging to the ordinary magisterium.

“She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. What did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? It is clear, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously; she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer’s feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance.” (Sermon 33)

In another place, St. Gregory the Great refers to St. Mary Magdalene as the “witness of Divine Mercy” (XL Hom. In Evangelia, lib. II Hom. 25.10) – as she has repented from her life of sin as expressed in Luke 7, and has been united to the Lord by her act of repentance and love. This quote is significant, since it has been taken up by Pope Francis in his recent elevation of the commemoration of St. Mary Magdalene of a true feast. Hence, at least implicitly, Pope Francis has likewise made use of his magisterial authority to teach the Church that St. Mary Magdalene is a “witness of Divine Mercy” as having repented from her previous life of sin and becoming one of the greatest saints in the life of the Church!

In addition to the teaching of Pope St. Gregory the Great and Pope Francis, this tradition has been affirmed at least implicitly by countless popes through the ages, and is recognized in the Church’s Liturgy – for the Tradition Mass of St. Mary Magdalene affirms that she is the penitent sinner of Luke 7, and this tradition has again become a normal part of the life of the Church since Pope Benedict XVI has clarified that the Traditional Latin Mass is a legitimate and necessary part of the Church’s liturgical life
even today. Additionally, which the Mass of Vatican II does not explicitly state that St. Mary Magdalene is the penitent woman, neither does it reject this thesis.

Finally, without quoting the innumerable saints of the Latin tradition, we will simply state that nearly every saint and mystic of the western Church has recognized that St. Mary Magdalene is the penitent sinner.

With such a tradition as this, the modern(ist) scholars will have to give strong reasons to prove that St. Mary Magdalene can’t be the penitent woman – as no such reasons can be found, we ought to accept with religious obedience the official teaching of the ordinary magisterium that St. Mary Magdalene is the penitent woman.

**St. Mary Magdalene is St. Mary of Bethany**

“And Mary was she that anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair: whose brother Lazarus was sick.” John 11:2

While some will claim that St. John’s Gospel must be read in total isolation from the other Gospels, the Catholic Church has always known that St. John (who wrote his Gospel last of all) intentionally made only slight references to various points stated more fully by Sts. Matthew, Mark and Luke. This is precisely what occurs in John 11:2.

St. John tells us that St. Mary of Bethany is the woman who anointed Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. While St. John Chrysostom denies that this passage refers to the penitent of Luke 7, St. Augustine and the great commentators of the Latin tradition affirm that this passage most certainly refers to the Magdalene. Indeed, St. Augustine is giving the most natural reading of the text.

It is unlikely that St. John could be referring to the anointing of our Lord which he will relate in chapter 12, since he introduces St. Mary of Bethany in chapter 11 as the one who had already anointed the Lord! Furthermore, it would be profoundly confusing for St. John to say, “This is the Mary that anointed the Lord,” if there were two well-known women named Mary (namely, one Mary Magdalene and another Mary of Bethany)! We would say, “St. John! Which Mary?” And he will reply, “They are one and the same! She who anointed the Lord in her repentance is the same Mary who anointed him prior to his death! St. Mary Magdalene is the sister of Sts. Martha and Lazarus!”

Pope St. Gregory the Great, in the passage sited above has already taught the Church that St. Mary Magdalene is St. Mary of Bethany – “She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary.” Furthermore, St. John himself specifies that St. Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb to anoint Jesus (and in this place he names her explicitly as the Magdalene), which fulfills what our Lord has said of St. Mary of Bethany, “Let her alone, that she may keep it against the day of my burial.” (John 12:7)

From the anointing in John 12, shortly before our Lord’s death, we know that the sister of Sts. Martha and Lazarus will be among the women to anoint the Lord in his burial.
This was fulfilled when “on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene cometh early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulcher” (John 20:1).

The Liturgy proves St. Mary Magdalene is the sister of Sts. Martha and Lazarus

A final argument, which to my mind is most convincing of all, is based on the Sacred Liturgy. Not only do we point out that the Traditional Mass has enshrined the tradition that St. Mary Magdalene is the sister of Sts. Martha and Lazarus, we further stress that, if St. Mary Magdalene is not St. Mary of Bethany, then the Church has no proper liturgical feast of St. Mary of Bethany!

How strange would it be to celebrate the feast of St. Martha but ignore in the liturgy the sister who has “chosen the better part”! Is it even reasonable to think that, in either the traditional Mass or the Mass of Vatican II, there could be no proper Mass for St. Mary of Bethany? In the modern martyrology, St. Mary of Bethany is mentioned on the feast of St. Martha (which is fitting), but can we possibly believe that the Church would fail to give her a feast day proper to herself? Truly, it is unthinkable!

On the other hand, the feast of St. Mary Magdalene falls on July 22, with the feast of St. Martha falling on the octave day (July 29). We know that the octave day of a feast is a “second celebration” of the feast day – hence, the feast of St. Martha is rightly understood as another feast of St. Mary Magdalene. This connection of the two feasts would make perfect sense if, as we have always believed, St. Mary Magdalene is the sister of St. Martha!

Obviously, the feast days for these two women were assigned on account of being the true dates of their respective deaths, but surely God arranged it in his divine providence so that we might never forget that St. Mary Magdalene is the true sister of Sts. Martha and Lazarus. The Liturgy teaches us that St. Mary Magdalene and St. Mary of Bethany are one and the same.