

ST PIUS X WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sinning Saints (2)

St Mary of Egypt (c344 - 421)

St Mary was born in Egypt and ran away from her parents about the age of twelve. She there began a life of sexual dissolution and prostitution. In the *Vita (her life)*, traditionally attributed to St. Sophronius in the 7th century (though see below), it is said that she often refused money from her clients since she was driven “by an insatiable and irrepressible passion” and was led to the depths of depravity. This life continued until about the age of 30 when she boarded a boat destined for Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Mary’s intentions were, however, far from spiritual. Her aim was to take the opportunity for more encounters with men, both on board ship and in the Holy City. This she achieved. On the actual Feast Day, and with the same intentions, she even followed and mingled with the pilgrims as far as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

On arrival at the Church Mary tried some three or four times to enter but was prevented by an invisible force. Overcome by guilt and remorse, she retired to the churchyard and prayed before an icon of the Virgin where she repented of her sins. She prayed that she be permitted to enter the Church and venerate the cross. This she then did, after which she heard a voice telling her to cross the River Jordan where she would find rest. She promised to renounce worldly things and become an ascetic. That same evening she reached the River where she received Holy Communion in church and the next day crossed the Jordan and entered the desert where she stayed until her death.

St Mary had lived alone in the desert for some 47 years when a monk/priest named Zosimus came to spend Lent there. The two met by chance. Zosimus relates how when he first saw her she was totally naked and barely recognisable as human. Mary asked him to throw her his mantle so that she could cover herself. They then talked and prayed together and she recounted her life story to him. Mary asked Zosimus to meet her at the Jordan on Maundy Thursday of the following year and to bring Holy Communion with him. This he did and she received Holy Communion; she requested that he return again the following Lent when he would find her in whatever condition God wished. Again Zosimus returned a year later, only to find her corpse and a note from her asking him to bury her and saying that she had passed away on the very same night he had given her Communion.

After the burial Zosimus went back to his monastery and told her life story which later scholarship suggests was written not by Sophronius in the 7th Century but before 500 A.D. by a monk or monks who had heard it from Zosimus himself.

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The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates Mary's feast on 1st April, whereas in the Roman martyrology her date is 2nd April. There are records of her being venerated in the East from at least the 8th century and in the West from the 9th century when the text of her life was first translated into Latin. Her relics are to be found in churches in Rome, Naples, Cremona and Antwerp, among other places.

St Mary of Egypt is the patron saint of converts and of chastity. She is also the protector against skin disease and fevers, presumably since she would have endured both many times during the near half century she spent in the desert.

SS
31st May, 2026

