**Mary Ward – her life, work and legacy**

Mary Ward was born into a recusant family in England 1585, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1. It was a time when to be a Catholic was to be persecuted. Times of persecution often fan the flames of faith. Mary Ward’s maternal grandmother went to prison for her Catholic faith and we know how important faith was to Mary, to the extent that she had dreams of religious life, even though there was great social pressure on her to marry and have a Catholic family.

The only choice in terms of religious life at that time for an Englishwoman was to go to Europe to join an enclosed religious congregation. She went to Saint Omer to become a Poor Clare and there she again encountered the Jesuits, having had contact with the Society earlier in her life. An early indication of the strength of her character can be seen in her decision to leave this convent, when she realised that this was not what God was calling her to. She left and returned to England. She spent the next few years discerning to what God was calling her. And it became clear through her prayer that she was being called to a life of active ministry, similar to that of the Jesuits. This was unheard of at that time. It is difficult to realise today just how radical it was. She attracted a group of young women who shared her sense of vocation, many of them from upper class Catholic England.

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In 1609, the small group of what we call the “first companions” left England and returned to St. Omer, where they opened a school for girls. At the same time, Mary was exploring ways to form the group into a religious congregation based on Ignatian spirituality and the Jesuit Constitutions.

Extraordinarily, this little group of women founded nine more schools across Europe between 1610 and 1628. After St Omer came Liege, Trier, Cologne, Munich, Rome, Naples, Perugia, Vienna and Pressburg, which is now Bratislava in Slovakia. This was a period of great growth, both in numbers of girls attending the schools and the numbers of her followers, who included young women from other European countries, who had been educated in the schools. During this period, she had the patronage of secular rulers such as the Elector of Bavaria. But parallel to this growth and flourishing there was a similar growth in opposition to her and to her vision of an un-enclosed apostolic religious life for women, and crucially that they should govern themselves and not be under the jurisdiction of the local bishops. This opposition came from all sides of the Church, from the secular clergy and from the Jesuits. Some of the terms used to describe her and her followers were “galloping girls” and “Jesuitesses”- and these were not intended as compliments.

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The opposition eventually culminated in a Papal Bull issued by Pope Urban VIII in 1631, which suppressed her Institute in very strong language, saying that it was *extirpating this pernicious weed,* and also accused her of being a heretic.At the same time, Mary Ward was imprisoned in a Poor Clare convent in Munich. Her deep faith and magnanimity are shown in the letters she wrote to her companions during her imprisonment. The letters were written in lemon juice on the wrapping paper in which her companions delivered her clean laundry. Twenty-three of these lemon juice letters survive today and in them, we read sentences such as:

*with all this and what else God will send, you and I must be contented till our Lord dispose otherwise*

and on another occasion

*if God would have me die, I would not live. It is but to pay the rent a little before the day.*

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Mary Ward was eventually released from imprisonment on health grounds and began a long slow return to Rome, to plead her cause with Pope Urban VIII. The Inquisition cleared her of the charge of heresy and the Pope publicly praised her personal holiness, but he did not rescind his Bull and remained implacable in his refusal to recognise her Society. As a result, to quote one author, her *Institute lay in ruins*. It is estimated that of the 400 plus women who had joined her fledgling hoped for congregation, only as few 50 remained after the suppression in 1631.

Much of the rest of her life was spent dealing with her increasing ill-health. In what might have been termed her heyday, in the period of the foundation of her schools, Mary Ward and her companions had made multiple journeys across the Alps on foot. Her last European journey began in 1637, when she left Rome to take the waters at Spa near Liege, she reaching there in summer 1638. She found little relief for her condition there and then returned to England, where the storm clouds of the English Civil war were gathering. Anti-Catholic feeling was so high in London, where she had hoped to found another school for girls, that in April 1642 she and a handful of companions and students returned to Yorkshire, the county of her birth. Her health continued to deteriorate and on January 30th 1645, she died, surrounded by a small group of faithful companions. She was buried in an Anglican churchyard, by an Anglican vicar who was described in a contemporary biography of Mary Ward as “*honest enough to be bribed*”. At that point, who could have foretold that almost 400 years later her congregation would be flourishing in 45 countries of the world, with a total of over 2000 members between the two remaining branches of her Institute, which are in the process of becoming one, it being only historical circumstance and external interference that led to earlier separation.

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And so to her legacy:

As early as 1612 Mary Ward had said to her first companions that “*There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things. And I hope in God that it will be seen in time to come that women will do much*”. In those words lies the key to understanding the two most important strands of Mary Ward’s legacy: the first of these was her vision of a new kind of religious life for women, as already mentioned - unenclosed, apostolic and self-governing. It is for this reason that so many, not only in our congregation but more widely, look to her as one of, if not the, pioneers, of the active religious life for women, with which we are all so familiar today. It is worth noting here that her Institute only survived the hundreds of years between 1645 and her rehabilitation as Foundress in 1909 by Pope Pius X, by not publicly acknowledging any connection with her as our foundress, whilst secretly keeping alive her memory and her legacy.

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The second important strand of her legacy was her belief in the capacity of women to do much, which in turn led to her conviction that the key to unlocking this capacity was education for girls. For that reason, the main ministry of the members of her congregation has historically been the education of girls. This continues to be the case in many parts of the world today, and it is something of which we are very proud, just as we are proud of our lay colleagues who are working with us in this ministry. However, our understanding of the ways to increase the capacity of girls and women is constantly developing. This is reflected in the increasing diversity of ministries undertaken by our members, the majority of them focussed on the empowerment of women and girls, whether through education or social and pastoral ministries, such as anti-trafficking, working against modern slavery and chaplaincy of all kinds.

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Central to everything we do is our understanding of Mary Ward’s charism of what she called a Just soul. Such a person is characterised by four virtues. The first of these is freedom, and specifically the freedom to refer all to God. The second is justice, the justice of being in right relationship with others, and today we would also understand this as being in right relationship with creation. The third virtue is sincerity, right relationship with ourselves, as she put it: *we be such as we appear and appear such as we are*. Over-arching these three virtues is the virtue of what she calls felicity, the quiet joy that comes from being wholly God’s. In all our ministries and our service, we try to put those “Just soul” virtues at the centre, as we believe that part of her legacy is not just what we do, but who and how we are: *being such as we appear and appearing such as we are.*

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It is our custom always to give the last word to Mary Ward. However, before we do so we note that at the end of her life “judgement was passed on her not by the Pope nor the Cardinals of the Holy Office, but by a voice from the crowd of the poor and lowly who had gathered for her funeral that ‘There never was such a woman, no, not ever’”. By the time she died in 1645 only a handful of her members remained and it looked as if all her endeavours and suffering, not least at the hands of the Church, had been in vain - but that was not the end of the story. She was a pioneer in promoting the contribution of women religious to the service of the Church, a Church that condemned her but which she always loved and only sought to serve.

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Before we finish, it is worth reminding ourselves of the description of Mary Ward by Pope Pius XII in 1952 as ‘*that incomparable woman whom England in her darkest and bloodiest hour gave to the Church’*. And in some of her own words to us all she encourages us, as she did her early companions, ‘*to act not out of fear but solely from love, because we are called by God to a vocation of love’.*

*NC and JFL*

*4/12/20*