

Sharing a treasure: Mary Ward's Just Soul experience

Every religious congregation has some documents that are precious - that capture the heart of a particular group. Sometimes these are letters, speeches or writings of the founder, or words that have emerged from moments of her or his prayer. These are documents the group will return to again and again to draw fresh insight and nourishment for their spiritual journey. Any such records that are critical for self-identity shape the 'charism' or grace given to that group for the good of the church and society. Often they stay hidden within the congregation and give little direct light beyond its borders. Sometimes the time seems ripe to share these with others.¹ Some quotations presume a deeper background knowledge but I have endeavoured to give explanations

For women who look to Mary Ward as founder², one such document is a letter she wrote in 1615. After some general background, I have approached this letter by exploring the world behind the text, the world of the text and finally the world in front of the text. In other words, the context out of which she wrote it, then teasing out the actual document itself, and finally looking at some later texts which show how seminal it was for Mary herself- and one can add to that other examples from the lives of her followers.

Who was this Mary Ward? For the many who have never heard of this woman, Mary Ward was an Englishwoman, born in 1585 into a staunch Catholic family during the reign of Elizabeth 1. England had broken free of the religious control of Rome and Catholics were persecuted as traitors who gave allegiance to a foreign power. At age fifteen she felt drawn to a prohibited way of life: as a cloistered nun in an era when all such places in England had been ransacked and demolished by royal decree. After holding firm for over five years in the face of opposition of family and friends, when she was 21 she finally left England to try an enclosed life, but over the next four years found herself called in prayer to 'something other', something 'more for the glory of God'.

At that time church law forbade women religious to work actively in the wider community. With six companions who were attracted to her rather embryonic vision, she once again crossed the channel and they began a communal life of prayer, teaching girls and working with adults to help strengthen their faith. Their way of life was influenced by that of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). This Society had been founded about 80 years earlier and was allowed to put aside some of the normal requirements of religious life (like saying the office in common and living/working within the walls of the monastery) to go where the need was greatest in the church or society, seeking to strengthen the faith of people through spiritual guidance and teaching at various levels. In 1611 Mary had a religious experience which convinced her that God wanted her group to take the same way of life as the Jesuits, even though church authorities thought such a plan was beyond the capacity of mere women.³ The letter that this article considers was written four years after Mary's insight that God wanted her to establish a society for women, parallel to but not dependent on the Jesuits.

Sources: Before turning to the actual document a word on sources from Mary Ward's life. The fact *any* exist could be one of the miracles Church leaders could look at when seeking confirmation of her

¹ In this article some short quotations gain more meaning with familiarity with the longer texts but I have endeavoured to give background where I can. *Till God Will: Mary ward through her writings* by M. Emmanuel Orchard (London. Darton, Longman and Todd.1985) is an accessible introduction to these writings.

² Today two juridically separate but closely linked congregations claim her as founder: the *Congregatio Jesu* (CJ) and *Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (IBVM). They work in 44 different countries across the globe.

³ For those who would like to find more on her life see Christine Burke: *The Gift of Mary Ward* (Melbourne. John Garratt Publishers 2013) for short overview of her life and significance for today.

sanctity! In 1631 Mary Ward was imprisoned as a heretic by the Church authorities. Her Institute was disbanded and suppressed by the ferocious condemnation of Pope Urban VIII: the members' vows were declared null and void; Christian faithful were commanded to repute their entire project as "suppressed, extinct, rooted out, destroyed and abolished."⁴ The small remnant no longer had any claim to be "religious", only a few permitted to live together as friends. In 1645, after 15 years living under suspicion of heresy, in broken health but still filled with trust in God, Mary died, having nominated Barbara Babthorpe to hold together this small band of women. They were without approval even as a pious society until 1703; in 1749 Pope Benedict XIV recognised their structure as a self-governing group but pointed out they still did not qualify as religious, because they were not enclosed. In the same document he forbade them to claim any connection to the congregation Mary Ward had tried to form. All reference to Mary Ward was forbidden, books about her burnt by order of the Inquisition. The communities were without a name and without a founder and as they spread to dioceses across Europe and the wider world, many new foundations were subject to "take-overs" by local bishops, resulting in a number of "mini-congregations", who knew they were linked but could not publicly claim any link to Mary Ward. In the following decades various bishops, confessors and frightened superiors in York and Germany gave orders to destroy documents relating to Mary Ward. New foundations in Ireland perhaps did not even know her name. So much was lost. In 1877 Pius IX approved the congregation as an institute of religious sisters, but refused to exonerate Mary Ward. Finally, in 1909, over 270 years after her death Pius X recognised Mary Ward as founder of the Institute.⁵ In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI declared her "Venerable", meaning that nothing in her life would prevent her being declared a saint.

Apart from the internal story of the Institute, the history of Europe over this period makes the existence of any source documents amazing. Civil oppression of Catholics continued in England until well into the 19th Century. Multiple wars were fought across Europe, culminating in the intense bombings of England and Germany during World War II. The convent at Augsburg which had housed some key documents was bombed and destroyed. It is incredible that any letters (including scraps written in lemon juice from prison), prayer journals, talks, scraps of autobiography from this woman are still extant, as are the 50 paintings known as the Painted Life. Many folios of Shakespeare were lost, yet some documentation from this despised woman was preserved. One could well say a miracle!

The world behind the text.

The document that this article explores is a letter written in 1615 by Mary Ward to her spiritual advisor, a Jesuit named Fr. Roger Lee. In-house we call it the *Just Soul letter*, but it helps to clarify language. 'Soul' in some spiritual writing is contrasted with the body. Such dualism finds no echo here. In Mary's understanding 'soul' is shorthand for the inner self, that depth where a person becomes open to relationship with her God. This is not a disembodied self but the whole person-

⁴ Bull, *Pastoralis Roman Pontificis*, Jan 13, 1631 see Mary Wright: *The Search for Identity*, Sydney: Crossing Press, 1997 190-193.

⁵ For those who are interested in the survival of such a group across centuries of condemnation, see Mary Wright: *Mary Ward's Institute: the struggle for Identity* (Sydney Crossing Press 1997) which draws on canonical records and archives to present an overview of this struggle.

loving, active, committed. Later in her retreat notes Mary refers to “a soul wholly God’s; that such only truly love, are strong, and apt for all good works as are in this world to be done.”⁶

Mary’s personal experience leading to 1615

Looking back at her life, sometimes, those of us who are Mary Ward women today focus on the three religious moments of 1609, 1611 and 1615. They are of course foundational to the formation of Mary Ward’s Institute. However, these religious experiences have a before and an after. Mary writes of earlier mystical experiences while in the Poor Clares -St Gregory’s day (1607) and St Athanasius day (1609). They were significant and life-changing. The latter experience cuts across all her work of the previous two years, her hopes and dreams since she was fifteen. She had no support as she discerned leaving the Gravelines Poor Clare convent, which she had founded. Her return to London could only appear as failure. She did not know where the path would lead. She was poised on the brink, having to rethink what holiness might mean if it was not ‘leaving the world behind’.

But this young woman from Yorkshire was not without inner resources from her earlier life. Her autobiographical fragments relate incidents which support the following “learnings.” She had a great desire to do what she believed God wanted. She had learned early to recognise the movements of her heart - when she felt at peace, when disturbed. She had learned to make up her own mind- even when faced with pressures from those she loved- no small task in an era where women were praised for being “meeke, humble and obedient.” She had learned to hold to her convictions. She had learned to be patient and wait for God who would bring about what God wanted if she continued to “seek first the reign of God”. She had learned how the poor live, and how to organise and negotiate with authorities. She now had to walk into an even more unknown future.

The Glory Vision

To move quickly through the background to this 1615 Text. In the later part of 1609, in London, Mary had a totally unexpected and overwhelming experience. Doing her hair in front a mirror she was “taken out of herself” with an experience of the love of God and a sense of being called to do something more for the glory of God. She was left with the words “Glory, Glory, Glory” ringing in her heart. This experience was so overwhelming she felt it must be from God. It gave no details or actual direction, but it was dynamic enough to be shared with friends who like her hoped to do something more for God. She was being called to trust that the ministry she and others were doing in London could be the basis for something new. These friends joined her. Some continued their underground efforts to help people in their faith in England. Others went with Mary across the channel to St Omer where they began a school, meanwhile praying constantly for clarity about the shape of their life together. Anyone who knows anything about groups knows they must be based in some commonly held practices and goals. To be recognised as a religious institute within the Church, these practices need official approval. But at this time no women’s group had been approved to take religious vows and at the same time work for the faith among adults and children beyond the convent walls.

Take the Same

In 1611 her quandary- how can they be a religious institute and still assist others in their faith journey? - is finally solved, when she intellectually understands quite clearly: *Take the Same of the Society*. The Society of Jesus had been given exemption from enclosure. Their rule was approved by Rome. Following their rule would enable the women to be both religious and apostolic. We have her own words for this experience in two different letters. In 1619, at a time of a crisis in her Institute,

⁶ Written in Liege, in October 1619. Ibid. 472. (text adapted to modern English)

she wrote to Fr Tomson, her spiritual director: **“what I had from God touching this: Take the Same of the Society; Father General will never permit it. Go to him. These are the words whose worth cannot be valued, nor the good they contain too dearly bought; these gave sight where there was none, made known what God would have done, gave strength to suffer what since has happened, assurance of what is wished for in time to come. And if ever I be worthy to do anything more about the Institute, hither I must come to draw.”** Writing in 1621 to the Nuncio Albergati she says **I heard distinctly, not by sound of voice, but intellectually understood these words, *Take the Same of the Society*, so understood as that we were to take the same both in matter and manner, that only excepted which God by diversity of sex has prohibited.** We can imagine the excitement and relief of her companions as she shared this with them, but also the recognition that they were embarking on a course which would not be easy. Mary was very clear on one thing: she had absolutely no intention that her group would be under Jesuit control! She added in her letter to Albergati: **“I think more often, of the inconveniences that would happen to both parties if ours should have any dependence on the fathers of the Society.”** She had quickly come to realise the division that could arise through confessors and others interfering in the affairs of the community.

It is worth spending a little time on what is meant by the *Same of the Society*. In this experience the **aim** of her small but growing group became clear: “the defence and propagation of the faith” – today might we rephrase it as “accompanying people in their spiritual journey”? And the **structure** became clear: a group of women, governed by their own Chief Superior, directly responsible to the Pope not a local Bishop, not limited by enclosure or the necessity of habit, free to go where the need was greatest. They would be a company of friends in the Lord, united in hearts and minds, committed to discerning the will of God and carrying forward God’s mission in the world.

A spirituality grounded in the Same

This choice is about more than Constitutions. Mary’s spirituality- and that of many of her companions- had been shaped by Jesuits, the itinerant pastors who had instructed the families among whom Mary lived in her youth. She had had a Jesuit spiritual director when she was discerning her vocation in York. While establishing the English Poor Clares she had arranged an Ignatian 30 day retreat-even though the Poor Clares were very firmly in the Franciscan tradition. She and her friends had experienced the Jesuit underground missions in London and across the north of England. Various members of their families had been martyred for the faith. They knew both the depth of Jesuits’ spirituality and their commitment to ministry.

Ignatian spirituality permeated Mary Ward’s prayer, letters and entire life. This chart indicates a few echoes of Ignatian priorities in her own words. Her spirituality was formed by her immersion in the Spiritual Exercises. “Take the Same” influenced her whole life. Her tombstone attests to its pivotal importance: “to persevere in the Same was all the ayme of Mary Ward”.

IGNATIUS	MARY WARD
1. Finding God in all things	1. Freedom to refer all to God
2. God’s goodness to us	2. Love God much and remember to thank him for all benefits as well secret as known...
3. A personal relationship with Jesus	3. “O Friend of all friends...” “Serve God with great love and liberty of mind...”
4. Importance of discerning God’s will	4. “To live or die for God is equal gain when his will is such...”
5. Readiness for mission.. to share the faith	5. “ A soul wholly Gods.. that such only truly lives, are strong and apt for all good works as are in this world to be done..” “There is no such difference ... that women may

	not do great things...
6. Union of hearts and minds via the Constitutions	6. "...hither I must come to draw." "why we cannot change."
7. Thinking with the Church	7. Living in obedience to the Bull of Suppression

Mary believed God wanted:

- Women of prayer, committed to a variety of ministries, able to guide and support others in their faith journey
- A community without enclosure: Free to go where the need was greatest, even when this involved danger.
- Women making the decisions, under responsibility to the Pope.
- Using the same rule as the Jesuits and a name for the group that included "Jesus".

While this list may not seem so extraordinary today, it nonetheless talks of a female autonomy which is still not universally recognised. It presumes female intelligence, courage, competence, leadership and ability for prayerful discernment. It challenges a dualism that restricts some capabilities to men while men allot others to women. After listening to stories from women in many cultures-Asian, Western, African, Indian - I can safely say that the patriarchy of her time which feared the equality of women is far from dead today in the church and many societies.

Mary met a solid brick wall. 60 years earlier the Council of Trent had ruled that enclosure was of the essence of women's religious life, as was control of their affairs by a male religious superior or a bishop. Many Jesuits were affronted that women should presume to model their lives on Ignatius' rule which called for intelligence and daring. Although a few thought these women had it in them to follow this path, many gossiped, wrote letters seeking expert opinion to back their condemnations, and worked against her through their role as confessors to her community. The English 'secular' (non-Jesuit) clergy resented the power of the Jesuits and their influence over the wealthy and important Catholic families. They saw women Jesuitesses as a fifth column of their competitors. Rumours were rife about the ministries these women were taking on. Many rumours went well beyond the facts, but there was no forum in which to refute lies or explain the reality. One final and seemingly unanswerable argument was added to the above: women had no access to solid theological education, which was the backbone of the Jesuits' success as educators and spiritual guides.

This rather toxic mix of opposition will escalate after 1621 when she goes to Rome. The Papal Court was the pinnacle of a hierarchical system foreign to Catholics who had grown up in the persecuted church in England. There they had no parishes, no dioceses, no bishops, no cardinals and no Nuncios. Papal Court diplomacy that said one thing to your face and another behind your back was foreign to her. Cultural differences worked against her. Coming from a country ruled for over 40 years by a woman, and growing up among women who spoke up to police and civil courts in defence of the faith, Mary assumed women's capabilities crossed accepted boundaries that limited women to roles dominated by "mari e muri" (a husband or a wall). She spoke up for herself rather than going through the levels of a patronage system which required the support of the influential male cardinals or ambassadors. While in 1615 this was in the future, the confusion sown by such cultural differences was already fuelling the rumour mill.

Mary goes on retreat

In this period 1611-1615 Mary was locked in a struggle. Roger Lee, her confessor, whom she greatly respected and loved, and whom she had vowed to obey, believed that the course oriented by her

1611 experience was doomed. He was under pressure from his superiors to dissociate himself from her and her schemes. He was concerned for her and spent time writing plans for her company which he thought had a chance of gaining Episcopal approval. But these were not in line with Mary's convictions. She required Papal approval for the full recognition of her dream. Her retreat notes in this period show her struggle to be obedient to Roger Lee. She balances on a tight-rope between personal conviction and obedience, refusing to deny either one. This capacity to entrust God to solve two opposing demands will be called forth again in the even more devastating experiences of 1631 and beyond. Like Jesus she was caught between God's will and the blindness of the religious authorities. It is possible to find parallels for this throughout history, especially for women founders of religious congregations.

The sisters were living in increasing poverty. Money matters related to their expansion to Liege were beginning to unravel, there was a mix-up over loans organised by a financial advisor who also worked for the Jesuits. Families in England were reluctant to give dowries to an unauthenticated religious congregation without a bishop or male chief superior at the helm. Division was growing among the sisters as various priests advised them that Mary was on the wrong track.

So in 1615 Mary went on retreat. She was convinced God wanted women in active ministry. This direction gave her peace and strength. She had met endless arguments from various authorities. She recognised that women lacked theological education.⁷ She knew church law was against her. Wise and caring guides said her plan was impossible. She holds all this in her heart as she goes to spend time, one on one with God.

The world of the text ⁸

To begin it might help to recall a moment in your own spiritual journey that has become a touchpoint for you. Just recall your first being struck by some words of Jesus or some scene that has stayed with you throughout your life. Notice how you have returned to it in different situations so that it has become something that bears fruit in your life. If possible, share this with a friend-naming such experiences helps us to gain confidence in speaking about the ways God has come into our lives.

The Just Soul experience comes to us directly in her own words, written on Sunday, 1st November, All Saints Day 1615. It was addressed to Fr. Roger Lee SJ and describes an experience she had towards the end of her retreat. It seems she had written briefly to him the previous day, but we do not have that letter. Mary wants Roger Lee's guidance but she is also anxious. Her opening lines show her stretched between obedience promised to him and the strength of a surprising mystical experience which she knows she cannot ignore. This letter is her attempt to give a fuller explanation, but she acknowledges the gap between her clarity about what happened and her ability to adequately explain it.⁹

⁷ - In Australia, women could not get a degree in Catholic theology till after Vatican II as all such teaching was in seminaries, which they, of course, could not attend.

⁸ It is essential to have a copy of the full text for this section. Unfortunately the version printed in the IBVM Constitutions leaves out a key paragraph, so the full text is added at the end of this article. The original text is in old English, so this version is rewritten in current English for ease of understanding. The original is found in *Mary Ward und ihre Grundung Die Quellentexte bis 45*. Band 1. Aschendorff Verlag Munster Westfalen 2007; 290-291. Many other texts are also found in these four volumes.

⁹ It seems Roger Lee possibly did not receive this letter as he died a few days later. After two weeks she writes again, concerned that he hasn't replied. He died awaiting a ship to take him to England, where he was being moved to prevent further support for Mary Ward's community.

“It seems a certain, clear and perfect estate, to be had in this life”. *Estate* in old English referred to a condition or way of life, like the estate of matrimony. It is in this life, not some future dream. She sees this estate as altogether needful for those who would join this Institute. Yet it is not like anything she has read about. Here we see a major shift happening. Her concept of holiness had been shaped by a theology that identified holiness for women with leaving behind the distractions of everyday life, being open at all times to moments of deeper union with God. Here Mary perceives a different way of life which attracts her greatly. This shift in understanding is captured in the Painted Life no.30 which shows the great religious founders and martyrs in the upper half of the picture and Mary Ward among the everyday folk in a lower part of the picture. Happiness, felicity, in this estate is based on a singular freedom *from* being trapped by earthly things, a freedom *for* an “entire application and apt disposition for good works,” which enables one *to* refer (carry back) all to God. “I seemed in my understanding to see a soul thus composed...” this is not like a vision before her eyes, but a realisation in her understanding.

The felicity of this estate connects for her with her understanding of the estate of our first parents. Today, this key reference is easily minimised by us, who recognise that this “myth” is not a scientific description of the origins of life. One tends to hurry past to the more serious bits! However, while most meditations on the First Parents focus on their fall and sin, Mary focuses on their state before the Fall. What do we know about that time as depicted in the Hebrew story of our origins? That as man and woman they walked freely with God in the Garden in the cool of the evening. They were naked- fully themselves before God, walking at peace in this paradise God had created, with no masks or pretences, nothing hidden. They were friends with God, and at one with creation, holding all in right relations. In this age of *Laudato Si*, this might be an image to explore with fresh awareness.

Here Mary evokes the amazing extent of God’s graced invitation. “Our Lord let me see it, to invite me that way and because he would give me grace in time to arrive at such an estate, at least to some degree”. This is what humanity is called to. It is a wonderful Image of grace. No wonder she prays to God as “Friend of friends”. This picture helps understand her emphasis on sincerity, that openness or nakedness with God based on freedom to refer all in our lives to God which she presents as core to our relationship to God. Mary uses “friend” for God, rather than the spousal language preferred by many medieval mystics.

The word “justice”: in those times did not immediately imply resistance to social wrongs. The emphasis is on what creates a just society- right relationships. Justice is being in right relationship with God, with others and with creation. It is worth taking a moment to name the qualities which lead to right relations- fairness, but also generosity, forgiveness, honesty, care. It is an active building of the peace that underpins a just society. A belief that all comes as gift from God takes the stress off what is owed to me and puts it on how I create good relations. The implications of this for community and family living, for the church, for society, for the global justice for both marginalised people and nature can be teased out.

“Those in former times that were called just persons, works (spelt ‘workes’ could it be ‘workers’?) of justice, done in innocence and that we be such, as we appear, and appear such as we are...” Throughout Mary’s life, verity, sincerity, integrity were crucial. Later she will refuse all subterfuge when she could have accepted another rule with a view to adapting it later without fanfare; imprisoned, she will put integrity ahead of signing a misleading document that would enable her to receive communion. In this 1615 experience she is drawn to this virtue of sincerity with a liking for it.

Then Mary moves to reiterate her concern that Roger Lee might see it all to be naught or be distressed by it, but she trusts that since God has given her Lee for a confessor it is in God's hands. She then adds a little extra thought... maybe this way she is being invited will last till the end of time since it is like that "in which we first began" ...This seems to bring the discussion back a second time to this living in friendship with God, which she values so highly and sees as God's dream for humanity.

One might be wondering what could disturb Fr Lee in this presentation so far? The three virtues Mary emphasises- Freedom, Justice and Sincerity are strong. Enclosure would limit freedom, would prevent almost "all good works" and to accept it would mean turning from the integrity of what she knew God wanted. But there is more to come.

The following sentences show Mary is not letting go of her belief that women can live this calling. This is the point at which Fr. Lee might throw up his hands in distress! She asks the question: why should these virtues matter so much "be so especially requisite as a ground for all the other virtues necessary to be exercised by those of this Institute?" She then explains a solution she sees to the conundrum of women daring to speak on matters of faith. The fathers of the Society do have access to education. However she points out they could be in danger of trusting their learning too much rather than recognising it is God's grace that acts through them. As women, her community have no access to that level of education but they do have access to God. If they are grounded in God, who calls and gifts them with wisdom and ability, God will give what is needed to perform the duties of this Institute...if they trust in God, live in Friendship with God. Freedom, justice and sincerity, are in some way the underlying qualities of this "first estate" – of friendship, openness and honesty before God, - to which God is inviting her, "the best disposition for a soul to be that would perform all this well". She sees this friendship with God as a fountain to which she could return for clearness and solid tranquillity. St Ignatius urged retreatants to return to an experience in prayer which gives nourishment, and Mary finds coming back and back to this insight both pleasing and profitable. She ends with desires to be good, and knows that without this yearning to be good she will not be able to live out this estate of life to which she believes she is called. She recognises that her will is stubborn and perverse (perhaps she sees Fr Lee as thinking that about her since she will not bend to his plan?) and that she can be self-willed, so she prays to be good...possibly meaning open to God's grace and direction, whatever it might cost. We as readers know that it will cost dearly.

This letter carries her key insights. Clearly, freedom, justice, sincerity are not three separate virtues, but are all intertwined and grounded in friendship with God- from God, in God and for God. If this is the particular charism she was given, then it is given for the church today. A slow reading of the text will suggest what it is saying to each one who takes it seriously.

Questions to ponder

Can we name ways in which these could be gift for our church and society?

Can these virtues lead us to a more Trinitarian way of relating to God?

- **Freedom**... in our relationship with Holy Mystery who created us free within the web of an expanding cosmos.
- **Justice**... in following Jesus who was enfleshed in our history and presented to us the vision of a reign of God based on right relationships. He showed God was with the poor and outcast, even though his message of God's love led him to a cross.
- **Sincerity**... in being in touch with the depths of our heart where the Spirit dwells and prays when we cannot find the words.

What does this conviction about women say to us as the people of God—living in a church which still rejects women’s leadership and a place for us at the table where decisions are made?

Does the vision of friendship with God and whole creation suggest ways we can be more involved in the efforts to prevent the search for “progress” destroying our fragile planet earth?

The world in front of the text

There are two levels for this third part. There is the impact of this experience on Mary Ward’s later life and there is the impact on women in her Institute over the last 400 years, including us today. I am suggesting in a very minimal way some texts which give an insight into its continuing importance for Mary Ward. I leave it to local stories which show this friendship with God alive and well in the freedom, justice and sincerity of her followers throughout history— in small and vulnerable expeditions to new lands in North America, Asia, India, Australia; in countries which suffered under Soviet rule; in readiness to speak the truth in love to authority; in working for greater rights for women, the poor, the vulnerable.

Mary’s later life showed an incredible conviction that women could contribute to bringing the love of God into creative tension with the realities of people’s lives. Her trust in the unchanging “Friend of all friends,” gave heart to her friends. She refused to give up when faced with such closed minds who would not even consider the possibility that women could live this life. She remained loyal to the church through the “long loneliness” with its ongoing sense of aridity. Her final message to her friends around her death bed said it all: - “commending the practice of God’s vocation in us, that it be constantly, efficaciously and affectionately in all ..” So her faith in the messages of 1611 and 1615 was unshakable. On her tombstone her companions wrote “To love the poor, to persevere in the Same, to live, dye and rise with them, was all the ayme of Mary Ward...” To women skilled in the art of writing in code, this speaks of her love for her companions, for the Catholics in England, and her commitment to taking the Same of the Society, and her unwavering hope that recognition would come one day.

Apart from retreat notes in 1612, all other writings we have are written by Mary after this Just Soul experience. It becomes a lens through which she understands her early life. Looking back she can see this call to freedom and friendship growing through events she relates. Talking to her companions in 1617, she draws strongly on her conviction that women are capable and called by God use their gifts in the service of the Gospel. The sheer honesty before God of her retreat experience, has deepened into a sense of the Verity which is God. Following are a series of quotations which echo in some way the insights Mary received in 1615.

This first three extracts are from her autobiographical fragments where she breaks into a prayer for her company, and her 1617 retreat notes:

- ▶endeavour henceforward to become lovers of truth and workers of justice... O Verity yourself, preserve them from errors, rectify their judgements, perfect their knowledge, endow them with true wisdom, make them able to discern things as they are in

themselves, the difference between trifles and matters of importance and what is to be done and not done in all..." (1617 Autobiographical fragment A).

- ▶ O parent of parents and friend of all friends, ... without entreaty you took me into your care and by degrees led me from all else that at length I might see and settle my love on you. What had I ever done to please you? or what was there in me wherewith to serve you? Much less could I ever deserve to be chosen by you... O happy begun freedom, the beginning of my good and more worth to me at that time than the whole world besides.." (1618-19: Autobiographical fragment B).
- ▶ "O my Lord how liberal are you and how rich are those to whom you will vouchsafe to be a friend..." (1617: Retreat Notes)

The three talks given in 1617 in response to the priest who asserted that "their fervour will decay because they are but women", indicate the strength of Mary's conviction that women could do this ministry if they remained rooted in God. She could not ignore such a comment. If allowed to shape the young sisters' thinking this would destroy their self-worth and their ministry to others.

- ▶ ...love verity, for who can love a lie and all things are lies that are not as they are indeed, or who can love a creature or a friend that is not as he seems to be? ... Fervour is not placed in feelings but in a will to do well, which women may have as much as men. There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things - as we have seen by example of many saints who have done great things and I hope in God it will be seen that women in time to come will do much.., I beseech you all for God's love to love Verity and true dependence and not adhere to this superior, to this father or this creature for affection, so that if they be lost, all is lost. Yet affection is great and dependence, but not *for* affection so that if they be lost all is lost... This is verity to do what we have to do well: many think it nothing to do ordinary things. But for us it is: to do ordinary things well - to keep our constitutions and all other things that be ordinary... this by God's grace will maintain fervour." (First Verity Speech. St. Omer 1617)
- ▶ ...but women: for what think you of this word 'but women' as if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man, which I dare say is a lie and with respect to the good father, may say it is an error. I would to God that all men would understand this verity that women, if they be perfectⁱ, and they (men) would not make us believe we can do nothing and that we are but women, we might do great matters. (First Verity Speech)
- ▶ It is a great ingratitude and some of the greatest to think that all things come by chance... and not to make benefits of all things as coming from the hand of God.., Jesus' command to apostles and others to preach and instruct... this is granted to all, as well to women as to men, secular and religious... I must and will ever stand by this verity ... that fervour must not necessarily decay because we are women, women may be perfect as well as men if they love verity and seek true knowledge. I mean not learning, though learning is a great help... but true knowledge you may all have if you love and seek it."(Second Verity Speech, St Omer 1617).

Her retreat notes of 1618 and 19 also echo her experience in 1615, especially her meditation on the First parents brings this insight back to her strongly.

- ▶ I was glad when I saw the way Christ took in the use of all created things was the most perfect... To proceed as Christ did was the portion of grace I only desired for my part and all the happiness I wished for in this life, seeming better to me than any other favour as most to the purpose while one must live in the world... to embrace with great affection whatever would make me like unto Christ in life and manners.” (1618 Retreat Notes)
- ▶ “The delicacy of this estate where sense obeyed reason, and reason the divine will, where there was neither darkness of understanding nor inclination to evil, whose work was the will of the maker and whose satisfaction that their God was pleased with them. O God could not this estate be had in this life? So much as it may be imparted to any, bestow in Jesus on her whom thou has made thus and to do those things”... I perceived the lesson I was now to learn was to part quickly from all that I saw to be less pleasing. This seemed possible for me to gain. I yielded and begged it with love and hope. I saw a glimpse of the fine estate, separation from hurt, strength and other excellences of a soul imbued with this grace and begged this good - which I now loved - for all the world, since so easy with his grace to be practised. This seemed the way, that they should first know it, after desire and endeavour for it a little and that God would do the rest..... a friendly separation from all things of this world - equally to have or want them, to see them and not love them. (1619 Retreat Notes-Reflection on First Parents).
- ▶ Because God was with me and I have freedom to speak to him and to ask of him all I would have and know...I had a short imperfect sight of the excellent estate of a soul wholly God’s, that such only truly live, are strong and apt for all such good works as are in this world to be done...God was by me and heard me... he was very near to me and within me which I never perceived him to be before... I saw him very clearly go into my heart and little by little hide himself in it... (1619 retreat Notes).

Finally there is the caption from the Painted Life 38- whether a quotation from Mary or words that sum up her understanding. Alongside a quite subversive painting which depicts symbols of church power as flung aside with trappings of royalty it reminds the viewer that

- ▶ “Our happiness, security and progress are not to be in riches, greatness and the favour of princes, but in having our way open and free to God Almighty, whence our strength, light and protection must come.” Painted Life caption.

And a far more moving are a few sentences at the end of the necrology (a reflection on a person’s life after they have died) for Mary’s beloved sister, Barbara who died in 1623. They have such a strong ring of Mary’s own use of English, that although the document is written by another sister, one imagines Mary had a hand in this final accolade. Barbara is remembered as someone who lived our “the Just Soul”

- ▶ “here are no miracles, yet true and solid value, worthy the imitation; no raps, yet a most straight union with God at all times; no revelations, yet a true knowledge of God and herself; no visions, yet she had God always present before her eyes, who is the true object

of all pure souls..." (1623: taken from the concluding paragraph in the necrology of Barbara Ward.)

In linking this extraordinary document to today, a few sections from Volume II of the IBVM Constitutions, approved in 2009 capture Mary Ward's insights in words for our time.

1.2 We are companions of Jesus, women at the heart of the Church, called to follow a crucified Christ in a discipleship of love; ready to labour, with freedom and joy, that in all things God may be glorified.

1.3 The Ignatian tradition, interpreted through a woman's eyes, is our graced heritage. In prayer, Mary Ward was led to see that this was the way God wanted for her Institute; this was the pathway to holiness that she and her companions were to walk.

1.4 Just as Ignatius gathered his first companions, friends in the Lord, to be the founding members of the Society of Jesus, so did Mary Ward gather together a small circle of generous-hearted women, ready to give their lives freely in the service of God.

1.5 Inspired by God to pioneer a new way of religious life for women, Mary Ward and her companions struggled, in the face of persistent opposition from within the Church, to realize their goal. Yet their loyalty to the Church and its authority was constant, their faith in God immovable.

1.7 It was through continual prayer that Mary Ward found the courage to be faithful to her convictions. She waited on God with inner freedom and fidelity. It is this spirit that impels us as an Institute to place boundless trust in God amid uncertainty and change, and with discerning love to walk the way of faith in joy.

1.10 The founding charism of the Institute was given to Mary Ward with clarity of vision and firmness of purpose through the mystical graces of 'the Glory vision', the call to 'take the same of the Society', and the experience of 'the Just Soul'.

1.11 A great love of God, and desire to do good, an attitude of openness to all good works, a freedom to refer all to God, and a readiness to follow the way of justice and sincerity in lightness of spirit: this is the charism that Mary Ward desired to shine through all our words and works.

1.14 As Mary Ward had the grace of forgiveness, we seek to be instruments of justice, peace and reconciliation wherever there is brokenness and oppression, wherever there is need. The rights and dignity of women are central to our concern.

Christine Burke IBVM

The Just Soul

Dearest Father,

I would exceedingly gladly for my better satisfaction and greater security, acquaint you with what hath occurred in these two days especially that which yesterday I wrote to your Reverence about, and going now to set it

down, the better I discern it, the less able I find myself to declare it. I seem to love it, and yet am afflicted in it because I cannot choose but retain it, and yet dare not embrace it for truly good till it be approved.

It seems a certain clear and perfect estate, to be had in this life, and such an one as is altogether needful for those that should well discharge the duties of this Institute. I never read of any I can compare in likeness to it; yet it is not like the state of Saints, whose holiness chiefly appears in that union with God, which maketh them out of themselves. I perceived then an apparent difference, and yet felt myself drawn to love and desire this estate, more than all those favours. The felicity of this estate (for as much as I can express) was a singular freedom from all that could make one adhere to earthly things, with an entire application and apt disposition to all good works. Something happened also discovering the freedom that such soul should have had to refer all to God, but I think that was after, or upon some other occasion; howsoever that such a thing there was I am very certain.

I seemed in my understanding to see a soul thus composed, but far more fair than I can express it. It then occurred, and so still continues in my mind, that those in Paradise, before the first fall, were in this estate. It seemed to me then and that hope remains still, that Our Lord let me see it to invite me that way and because He would give me grace in time to arrive to such an estate, at least in some degree.

That word justice, and those in former times that were called just persons, works of justice, done in innocence, and that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are, those things often since occurred to my mind with a liking of them. And that you may know all and judge according (though several times since I began to write, I have found an extraordinary horror in myself, and with all a fear that you would see it all to be nought, and be much afflicted at it) but howsoever, blessed be Our Lord, who hath provided me of such, as can tell me what is good.

I have moreover thought upon this occasion, that perhaps this course of ours would continue till the end of the world because it came to that in which we first began.

Once I found a questioning in myself why this state of justice, and virtue of sincerity should appear unto me so especially requisite as a ground of all those other virtues necessary to be exercised by those of the Institute, and it occurred, that the fathers of the Society, being men, wise and learned; they might by those their natural parts perform the functions of this Institute without so special concurrence of God's grace, as might require their constant vigilance and care, in the practice of these above said virtues, and therefore if anything should be in danger to decay amongst them it might be this [] As also that we, wanting that learning,

judgement and other parts that men have, yet being grounded in this we should gain at God's hands true wisdom, and ability to perform all such other things as the perfection of this Institute exacts of us.

After both that day, and the next as my meditations further discovered the condition of this Institute, me thought I better understood those particulars one, by one, practically, not confusedly, than ever before I had done; they led me severally to that first estate, as the fountain, and best disposition for a soul to be in, that could perform all this well, and from thence I could without labour return to them again, and discern with great clearness and solid tranquillity the excellency, and convenience of them. So as a great part of these two days has been exceeding pleasing, and I hope profitable, for I end with desires to be good (which I see I am not, and without that, it seems impossible I should be able to do good, as least according to the estate of life, whereunto I think I am called, for my will is so exceeding stubborn and perverse, as that it will not let me possess any good with certainty or without fear to lose it again. And how much this indisposition, for God's favour doth hinder me, in a, I can better perceive in myself that show to those I should. I humbly beseech you obtain my amendment of God, and help me to be good, how dear soever it cost. Bestow on us all your blessing.

Your ever unworthy M[ary] W[ard]

Upon All Saints Day 1615 which was on a Sunday.