

## **Glimpses of Glory**

Who would have thought that the simple action of a woman brushing her hair could be a moment of revelation of God's glory? Who would have thought that this moment could be the beginning of an international congregation? Who would have thought that 400 years later a member of that congregation would be writing about the theological implications of this so ordinary action that proved to be such an extraordinary event? The following article addresses these questions by exploring Mary Ward's founding illumination; reflecting upon the reality of God's glory that this revealed; and the ecclesial witness made known. To assist our contemporary appreciation I shall be drawing from the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar who focused much of his writing on the glory of the Lord.

In 1609, Mary Ward was in London undertaking what we might see as the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. She was encouraging people in their faith; preparing them to receive the sacraments; arranging for priests to meet with groups of Catholics; and visiting those in prison on account of their faith. This was a dangerous apostolate and she often traveled in disguise.<sup>1</sup> "She laboured day and night in seeking to gain lost souls, despising danger either to life or honour, for she was accustomed to say that 'God is not wanting to good wills, and that it gives Him pleasure that we should trust Him, when He

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<sup>1</sup> "The success with which God rewarded her daring attempts only urged her on to further enterprises, and gave her greater confidence in [God]. . . . She led back into the fold of the Catholic Church, not a few of those who had wandered from the path of the true faith. . . . her prayers and her holiness of life made as many conversions as her powers of controversy. Her courage and perseverance were indomitable." M.C.E. Chambers, *The Life of Mary Ward* [1585-1645] Vol. 1. London, Burns & Oates, 1882, 223-24.

gives us light to know that He trusts us”<sup>2</sup> Mary mixed in the society to which her birth gave access but with a missionary spirit that sought through the ministry of spiritual conversation to attract others to a deeper interior life. The fruit of her efforts included a substantial number of religious vocations.

In the midst of this significant apostolate Mary experienced a supernatural illumination. She recognized it as such, having already experienced something similar, a previous year. On the Feast of St. Athanasius 1607 Mary had understood through a similar occurrence “that I was not to be of the Order of St. Clare; some other thing I was to do, what or of what nature I did not see, nor could I guess, only that it was to be a good thing, and what God willed.”<sup>3</sup> God continually surprises human beings by revealing himself not through extraordinary happenings but in the ordinary reality of everyday life.

Mary Ward was born in 1585 in Yorkshire England. She was the daughter of a Roman Catholic family whose members had already suffered heavy fines and imprisonment for the faith. From her teenage years she resolved to enter religious life. In the early years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century this meant going abroad – the Reformation had ensured closure of all religious houses in Britain. To enter religious life then was to leave the country of her birth and to remain for the rest of her days devoted to praying for the Church and the world behind closed doors - a hidden life. Mary initially saw her call to be a Poor Clare – the most austere contemplative order of that time. She had entered a convent of Poor

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Chambers 180.

Clares at St. Omer<sup>4</sup> and then was inspired to found a convent of Poor Clares for English women nearby at Gravelines.

There was at that time no possibility for women of bringing together an ascetic ideal [associated with monasticism] and an active life. The conception of women living an active life in union with God was entirely alien. The illumination on the Feast of St. Athanasius disrupted her plans for this form of contemplative life. She left the convent, returned to London and began to think that she might be called to be a Carmelite instead. It was at this point, while she was helping others to develop their interior life that what became known later as the *glory vision* or illumination occurred. Mary was sitting brushing her hair when:

“I was abstracted out of my whole being and it was shown to me with clearness and inexpressible certainty that I was not to be of the Order of St. Teresa, but that some other thing was determined for me, without all comparison more to the glory of God than my entrance into that holy religion would be. I did not see what the assured good thing would be, but the glory of God which was to come through it, showed itself inexplicably and so abundantly as to fill my soul in such a way that I remained for a good space without feeling or hearing anything but the sound, ‘Glory, Glory, Glory’<sup>5</sup>

Mary was totally transported by this intellectual understanding – coming as it did after what she had considered a ‘cold’ meditation, with a resolution to give financial assistance to a young woman wanting to enter a convent. It was precisely in this concrete

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<sup>4</sup> St Omer, is now part of France but in the early sixteenth century it was part of the Spanish Netherlands near Calais. The region became part of France in 1677.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Ward, Italian Autobiography, 1629, cited in Chambers, vol. 1, 227.

consideration when Mary was pondering an action, while brushing her hair, that this spiritual illumination came with great clarity. In the midst of her active concern with another matter Mary recognized the revealing touch of God. Such recognition also indicates that she had already been granted a contemplative disposition - resulting from her disciplined practice of prayer. This was the foundation of her activity and had refined her sensitivity to the presence of God at work in her life. Her previous illumination had brought clarity amidst her uncertainty. She knew she was not to be a Poor Clare. Now, in 1609, it was clear she was not to become a Carmelite, she had finally to abandon the possibility of a purely contemplative life.

There was 'something more' that God was calling her to do, and it is clear that this as yet unspecified task became the object of Mary's desire capturing both her imagination and her heart – the seat of all desire. This 'something more' was revealed two years later in 1611 when a further illumination following a bout of sickness convinced her that God was calling her to "*Take the same of the Society*".<sup>6</sup> She was to found an Institute that would have the same Constitutions as the Society of Jesus, to engage in an active apostolate at the service of the Church.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless it is the *glory vision* of 1609 that

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Ward wrote to the Nuncio Albergati concerning this illumination as follows: "Being alone, in some extraordinary repose of mind, 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 hath prohibited. These few words gave so great measure of light in that particular Institute, comfort, and strength, and changed so the whole soul, as that impossible for me to doubt but that they came from Him, Whose words are works." Some years later in an account in a letter she wrote to Fr. Gerard in 1619 she stated: "What I had from God touching this, was as follows [understood as it is writ, without adding or altering one syllable], "*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 hath happened, assurance of what is wished for in time to come." Chambers 283-284.

<sup>7</sup> In early seventeenth century Europe this was a scandalous suggestion.

marks the beginning of the Institute<sup>8</sup> and which causes this theologian<sup>9</sup> to seek the theological implications underpinning that resonance of “Glory”.

Mary Ward’s *glory vision* points not only to the heart of her individual existential situation but also to the ‘proper center of theology’. Her apprehension of glory in this illumination is firmly rooted in the Christian theological tradition. For God’s splendour reveals and authenticates itself definitively precisely in its own antithesis as love selflessly serving out of love. We see this definitively in the salvific action of God on behalf of human beings in the incarnation, passion death and resurrection of Christ. There are two theological realities operational: the glory of God and the covenant to which God’s glory invites the human person. God is not only glorious-in-Godself, but also glorious-for-us. God is not only Love, the eternal act of perichoretic indwelling between the Father and the Son hypostasized as the Spirit who is herself Love, but God also loves the human person on whom he freely chooses to disclose divine love in the fullness of the act of creating. The Trinity is love ad-intra and ad-extra. Accordingly, God’s love is a mutual revelation of the divine Persons in whom they are Lover, Beloved and Love and an external revelation of love as God’s nature to each human person.

Human beings always stand in awe of God who is always greater, always mightier, always transcendent, always completely and irrevocably Other. The love between Creator and creature is always of the powerful Lord who graciously and mercifully bestows kindness and delight on his servant. This understanding gives coherence to Mary Ward’s

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<sup>8</sup> In 1978 the original branch of Mary Ward’s Order asked for and were finally granted the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> The author is a theologian teaching Systematic Theology.

existential experience of the inexplicable nature of the glory of God that in abundance filled her soul. This very human experience of being struck by glory, of being penetrated by the divine presence is the foundation of the theological vision of Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>10</sup>. His extraordinary theological vision attempts to speak words of beauty and honour to reflect the grandeur of the mystery of God's love for human beings.<sup>11</sup>

The foundation of the God-human covenant is the paradox of God's glory as love – the divine desire to exchange love with human beings and for them to bear fruit.<sup>12</sup> Mary Ward understood this reality in her awareness that God was calling her through the *glory vision* to something new that would not only fulfill her religious vocation but that would also be fruitful in the life of the Church. She recognized this illumination as an echo of God's glory, and, as a woman who had been formed by Jesuits - who focused their mission 'to the greater glory of God' - she was sensitive to what might rebound to the glory of God.

It might be argued that in Mary Ward's spiritual illumination the Ignatian *ad majorem Dei gloriam* is opened up to the Johannine interpretation of the total biblical unity *kabod-doxa-gloria* and thus to the final form of revelation's own self-interpretation. In this way Mary Ward stands within the Judaeo-Christian tradition and her desire in the early seventeenth century to be responsive to what might lead to God's glory and the help of souls finds an echo in Balthasar's twentieth century concern.

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<sup>10</sup> A twentieth century Swiss theologian

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<sup>12</sup> C.f. John 15

Balthasar was deeply concerned that our own post-Christian times have lost the sense of glory. Unlike Mary Ward we have become desensitized, our affect flattened, our hearts not attuned to God or Being. As Nietzsche claimed ‘God is dead’, because we have killed our inherent desire to be grasped by God. Balthasar’s *Glory of the Lord* is a long lament<sup>13</sup> about this loss, at this dehumanization and he recognizes that if we are to wake up and bear our Christian responsibility namely to bear the light/*doxa* revealed to the world we must also recognize its continuity yet at the same time discontinuity with the *doxa* as experienced in the history of the world.<sup>14</sup> It is this paradox of the need for the retrieval of a sense of glory in history – ‘history is the apocalypse [i.e. the opening] of the decision of the intellect for or against God’<sup>15</sup> – yet at the same time, for remembering and being conformed to the newness that Christ continues to bring to history, that is the task of the Christian today.

Balthasar presents a helpful threefold schema that contrasts the Greek experience of *doxa* with the Hebrew biblical *kabod* and Christian *gloria*, while also suggesting a post ‘modernity’ awakening and synthesis to *doxa-kabod-gloria*. For the Greeks, *doxa* was an a cosmic appearance, first as the personified ‘gods’ and later as the harmonious revealedness of the cosmos itself. This ‘book of nature’ exposed the world as just and fitting with divine ordinances, and hence as inviting to an ethical ordering of human life

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<sup>13</sup> 7 volumes.

<sup>14</sup> Continuity because: “if a concept that is fundamental to the Bible has no kind of analogy in the general intellectual sphere, and awoke no familiar echo in the heart of man, it would remain absolutely incomprehensible and thereby a matter of indifference. It is only when there is an analogy [be it only distant] between the human sense of the divine and the divine revelation that the height, the difference and the distance of that which revelation discloses may be measured in God’s grace.” [IV, 14]

<sup>15</sup> II, 39.

in imitation of cosmic life. In turn this beauty and order of the cosmos was experienced as awakening a sense of gratitude, awe and delight, which expressed itself in poetry, myth and philosophy as natural theology.<sup>16</sup>

The most profound experience of the Hebrews of *kabod* was as the word of God spoken directly to them as people, through the voice of mediators: Moses, the Judges, Kings and Prophets. The word was an “integration from an abstract-sensuous *kabod* to the concrete-personal *kabod*”<sup>17</sup> which bound them to a the lived experience of God’s goodness, grace and blessing, but that called for their radical obedience to the *Torah*, the law of God. The threefold experience of *doxa-kabod* in the Hebrew ‘testament’ – as a *call* experienced as *gift* that enraptures and calls forth a *conversion* of heart to an ethical living – is therefore unbroken.

It remains unbroken even in the ‘totally new’ of the Christian *Gloria* where the word *is* revealed as Divine Person *who* becomes flesh and is emptied on the cross for us. The ‘form’ and ‘splendour’ of Christian revelation are one and the same in the one who reveals who God is – self-offering love – while hiding in its antithesis, the Cross as symbol of human sin. The revealed law is that which transcends all law – love – while the grace that is experienced is the very Person of the Holy Spirit. In our post-modern times, Balthasar likewise presents the challenge to us: in the final revelation-in-hiddenness of God’s love on the Cross, we are invited to a new creation, a new right worship in the Spirit, that imitates Christ, who is the first-born of God’s new eschatological creation.

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<sup>16</sup> IV, 21-23; V, 610.

<sup>17</sup> VI, 415



This will be the task of Christian life; this has always been the task of Christian life and it finds its appropriate foundation in the self-emptying of the Son.

We can glimpse in Mary Ward's *glory vision* traces of a Trinitarian understanding that characterised the life and work of Ignatius. For both, Christ was the center of their lives and it was Christ who revealed for them the reality of the Trinity. In Christ the Word-made-flesh is the 'form' of the Father, his very divinity hidden in his humanity was revealed in the glory of the *mysterium paschale*. The cross is the entry point through which humanity encounters a new truth, a new goodness and the awareness of beauty. The free self-emptying of the Son reveals the truth about God as light and love. God has made Godself known and now desires a human response.

The cross is a revelation of who we are called to become. The kenosis of the Son becomes also the disciples' existential condition. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." [Gal. 2.20] In this verse Paul's emphasis is threefold: first on the becoming disciples through the act of faith; secondly on the self-emptying of the disciple herself who becomes conformed to Christ's kenosis on the Cross; thirdly, on how the disciple's new Christian form is thus inherently imitative. The pattern of divine love is the cross – a pattern of life for Mary Ward and those who followed her who are drawn into the divine trajectory. This is not a destructive burden but rather a source of empowerment enabling a deeper refining of interior dispositions, a more refined *sensus Christi*.

For Mary Ward, contemplation and action were intertwined. It is not a form of contemplation that leads to epistemological issues – our activity of gaining knowledge - rather it is a contemplation that leads to action and an action that leads to the discovery of truth. Such a discovery is consequent upon participation in the world, a world we come to know in its beauty and truth through the self-giving love of God. We can only reflect on the truth of Christian revelation by becoming a player in the midst of this world, involved as we are in the passion and the Passion of God.<sup>18</sup>

The theological task, which is always a scriptural exegesis attentive to the signs of the times, continues in the Church through the re-interpretation of its foundational experience/story in the tradition of breaking open the word/Word in the prayerful reflection on God. It is from this place of prayer and sacraments within the Church that the individual members live their vocation as part of the reconciling mission given to the Church by Christ. For Mary Ward the primary embodiment of this work of reconciliation lay in the Church. For her as for Ignatius the institutional structure of the Church was vital since Christ had guaranteed the presence of his spirit within the Church. They could not see any definitive conflict between the freedom of the individual conscience and the teaching of the institutional Church.<sup>19</sup> This was despite the fact that both – and indeed

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<sup>18</sup> “The life common to Christ and the Church is ..... actual life poised between perdition and redemption, sinfulness and sanctity. The existence of sin within the field of force of grace, the impact, here and now, between despairing obduracy and crucified love, these, and not a colourless and static world of philosophy, are the matter of theology. This is why it cannot be expressed solely in the sleek and passionless form of the treatise, but demands movement, sharp debate .... The virile language of deep and powerful emotion.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh*, [San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1989], 204-5.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Quash makes a similar point when he states: “Ignatius was committed to the view that there could be no absolute conflict between the nearness of the God of his conscience and experience [the grace from

Balthasar also - found their lives and work called into question by Church authorities. Rather, they saw a creative tension between the action of the Holy Spirit operative in the Church and in the individual – a creative tension that was fruitful for the life of the Church.

It is clear from what has already been indicated that for Mary Ward the possibility of living in such an ecclesial way so that the mission of Christ may be promoted involved a deeper contemplative living that found expression in an active apostolate. The *glory vision* reveals that she already had a well-developed contemplative prayer life. It was this integration of contemplative prayer and action that enabled her to be extraordinarily effective in her apostolic efforts and to endure the suffering that marked her vocation seeing this as part of her sharing in the redemptive mission of Christ. The *glory vision* reveals an understanding of God's glory that clearly stands within the Christian theological and spiritual tradition. Mary Ward continued to draw deeply from her *glory vision*, for the remaining years of her life trusting that the radiance that had marked the beginning of this new foundation would continue to shine forth in the Church to the glory of God. For it is clear that she understood in this illumination that this new foundation was not just a vocation for herself or those who chose to join her, rather it was a gift of God given to the Church and part of God's redemptive work for the life of the world.

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within] and the institutional direction of the official Church [the God from without].” “Ignatian Dramatics”, 85.

Four hundred years later Mary Ward's daughters seek to re-appropriate the *glory vision* in their own lives. If we are indeed to hear something of that resonance then clearly we need to pay attention to our own contemplative living; our willingness to embrace the paschal mystery in our own lives; and our ecclesial witness in fidelity and truth. Perhaps then on every continent latter day followers of Mary Ward will find within their everyday actions, their apostolate, the revelation of God's glory and hear the echo "Glory, Glory, Glory."