

Sr. Mary Wright IBVM Response to Sr. Gemma Simmons CJ 6 October 2009

Dear friends of Mary Ward,

First of all, it is my privilege to thank you, Sr. Gemma, for your stimulating words. You have drawn on your own expertise and experience to show us how fresh and important Mary Ward's insights continue to be despite the four hundred years that have passed since her Institute began. In the context of the new global challenges we face, you have explored with us the depth and significance of her understanding about the "much" that women can do and must continue to do for the Church and for the whole world in the twenty-first century. And we will all look into the mirror in a different way from now on.

To complement the picture you have drawn, I would like to focus on one aspect of this significance, namely Mary Ward's struggle with the Church leaders of her day. What might this say to us as we confront new challenges in this Church of ours, which is in need of reform in every age?

More than most great holy people Mary suffered hostile and public humiliation from the Church authorities. She was arrested and imprisoned as a "heretic, schismatic and rebel of Holy Church". Her communities were described in the Bull of Suppression as "weeds" which were to be "rooted out" of "the field of the Church militant". She was slandered from all sides, particularly by some members of the clergy. She was surrounded by spies and informers and left in ignorance of decisions made about her and against her.

The Church of her time was indeed a Church militant in which popes, cardinals and bishops were rulers of states and cities as well as pastors of their ecclesial communities. It was a Church weakened, agitated and on the defensive against the more modern, aggressively anti-Catholic protestants of northern Europe. It was a Church where heretics could be executed, as we are reminded by the statue of Giordano Bruno in Campo de' Fiori in the centre of Rome. It was also a Church where modern ideas of science and philosophy were threatening and undermining previous certainties and the authorities that

guarded them. We can see this militant Church reflected in the themes of the statuary, paintings and architecture of many Church buildings that were erected in this city during the early years of the seventeenth century, during Mary's lifetime. Just as the name of the Roman Emperor was carved above the entrance to the Pantheon, the huge inscription carved above the front entrance of St. Peter's basilica proclaims the name of the Pope who built it, rather than the name of the saint or the God in whose honor it was built. (IN HONOREM PRINCIPIS APOST PAVLVS V BVRGHESIVS ROMANVS PONT MAX AN MDCXII PONT VII [In honor of the prince of apostles; Paul V Borghese, Pope, in the year 1612 and the seventh year of his pontificate]).

It was this Church, with its reliance on political and military power, which tried to eradicate the small community of women whose only desire was to help in its rebuilding after the era of divisions and devastation which began with Martin Luther in Germany in 1517. Like St. Frances exactly four hundred years before her, Mary and her followers were Church reformers from within. They understood that true and lasting reform must begin at the grass roots, helping people to know and love God as revealed in Jesus Christ, encouraging the development of their personal spiritual life, educating them to enable them to be active participants in the life and mission of the Church.

Just over one hundred years after Pope Urban VIII's Bull of Suppression crushed her Institute, another Pope, Benedict XIV, decreed that the Institute could continue to exist with its own autonomous general government and its apostolic life style, as long as it did not acknowledge Mary Ward as its founder. Unfortunately a zealous interpretation of this edict led to the irreparable destruction of many of her writings, the almost complete eradication of Mary's name and the obliteration of the memory of her spiritual and apostolic legacy. Various early biographies of Mary Ward were put on the Index, the list of books banned by the Church because they were considered dangerous to faith and morals. It was only in 1909, one hundred years ago, that this burden of accusations was removed by decree of Pope Pius X who allowed the Institute finally to openly acknowledge this very special woman as its foundress.

After the wars and the depression of the first half of the 20th Century which slowed the rediscovery of Mary Ward and the growing interest in her life and ideas, it must have

been an unexpected delight, when Pope Pius XII, in 1951 named Mary Ward, with St. Vincent de Paul, as patron of the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate, acknowledging her as *‘that incomparable woman whom, in its most somber and bloody times, Catholic England gave to the Church.’* This relatively minor event is significant as the first public occasion in which a Pope offered words of acknowledgement of Mary Ward’s greatness, indeed her uniqueness, not only for her native country but for the whole world.

In 1961, Sr. Margarita O’Connor, a member of the Institute in Canada, wrote a life of Mary Ward, which she entitled *‘That Incomparable Woman’* in recognition of the Papal appreciation. Margarita must have had a sense of humour, because at the heading of chapter I she quotes Ps 89/90 verse 4, which reads: To you, [O Lord] a thousand years are only like a day.”

It was nearly forty years later when again we were surprised, this time by Pope John Paul II in 1988. In a major document about women in the Church, entitled *Mulieris Dignitatem*, paragraph no. 27 we read:

In every age and in every country we find many "perfect" (a word that would better be translated as ‘valiant’) women (cf. Prov. 31:10) who, despite persecution, difficulties and discrimination, have shared in the Church's mission. It suffices to mention: Monica, the mother of Augustine, Macrina, Olga of Kiev, Matilda of Tuscany, Hedwig of Silesia, Jadwiga of Cracow, Elizabeth of Thuringia, Birgitta of Sweden, Joan of Arc, Rose of Lima, Elizabeth Ann Seton and Mary Ward.

I must admit I had to do some research to introduce myself to many of these women. They all appear to have been valiant, either as mothers, queens, princesses, nuns, and some as very militant warriors themselves, However few of these remarkable women were treated as harshly within the Church as was Mary Ward. Of twelve acknowledged here as among the great women of the Church, all but two are now recognised as saints. Matilda of Tuscany, while not officially canonized, is in fact buried in St. Peter’s Basilica here in Rome, with a magnificent tomb by Bernini. Thus our Mary Ward of Yorkshire

and of the whole world stands out in this list as the only one whose virtue and contribution to the Church, and far beyond the Church, is yet to receive full recognition - which makes her inclusion in the list all the more remarkable.

In your guide book of Mary Ward's Rome you will find mention of the small Church of San Eligio degli Orafi, where Mary went to pray on June 26, 1625. The *Painted Life* tells us about her experience there, when "she received from our Lord so much light and knowledge regarding the forgiveness of enemies, that henceforth she cherished a tender affection for all who wronged her, and was in the habit of calling them friends and lovers of her heavenly reward."(PL41)

In this scene, and many similar, we see an exceptional aspect of Mary Ward's character and spirituality. In her ability to forgive she shows herself to be a true disciple of Jesus to the very end. In this she is also a worthy follower of Ignatius, who invited his brother Jesuits to welcome "contempt [*contumelias*], lies [*calumnies*] and injuries and to be accounted and looked upon as fools [...], because they desire to resemble and imitate in some degree our Lord Jesus Christ, [...] who is the true way that leads to life." (SJ Cons. 101).

So as we celebrate the survival of her Institute and the endurance of her spirit through these long and often difficult four hundred years, it is helpful to reflect on Mary Ward's gentle bravery and patient large-heartedness. Her example can teach us how to respond to our present difficulties, disappointments and challenges, remembering also her advice that "we must await [...] God's time and leisure, for we must follow and not go before him."

Or in the words attributed to another yet-to-be canonized saint, Archbishop Oscar Romero: "*It helps now and then to step back and take a long view. We accomplish in our lifetime only a small fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.*" In this long view we see how Mary Ward's significance in the Church has endured and indeed grown, as Sr. Gemma has described. Her extraordinary insights and

exceptional qualities continue to be relevant and fruitful in ways unimaginable during her life. Mary Ward is indeed a “*prophet of a future not [her] own.*”

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