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Fourth Centenary of the birth of Mary Ward

On the page of the booklet for this Mass we see a very lovely picture of the first stage of Mary Ward's life. The little child has left her bed and taken the first steps towards the open space of life. From her mouth has come her first word, the name of Jesus. One gets the impression that little Mary is following the sound of that word, walking along the trail of that name. Her first steps coincided with her first word. The name Jesus became the path of her life. In fact the many journeys in the life of Mary Ward were made always in the ambit of that name, all her life was a response to the call expressed in the name of Jesus.

In keeping with this personal plan of Mary Ward's life, we have chosen for the celebration of the fourth centenary of her birth the texts of the Mass in honour of the Blessed Trinity. Her life developed in constant reference to the living God, in a constant and eager search for the "greater glory of God". I think that her choice of the Jesuit rule finds its ultimate explanation not for any practical reasons, which are important too, but in the common search for the greater glory of God in responding to the call of the name of Jesus. The word of the Risen Jesus at the end of St Matthew's gospel, read in this Mass, gives us the key to the true motivation of Mary Ward's life lived in the following of this command.

Let us ponder briefly on the words of the gospel "The eleven disciples went at once to the hill in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go" (28:16). To see Jesus the disciples had to GO. "Quickly go and tell" were the first words of the angel to the women after the Resurrection of Jesus. And to this "go" is added a new message: "Behold I go before you". The Lord always goes before us. To believe always includes the need to follow, to walk towards the One who leads. We can never be content with ourselves, with our life, with our virtue. The Lord goes ahead of us. Only by journeying will we see Him. St Augustine says "If you say 'enough, that will suffice for me' already you are lost". There is always also the other command to "go and tell others". Faith involves this double movement – to follow Jesus, to go and tell others. We do not believe only for ourselves but also for others. Faith needs to be communicated. Consequently, to believe is always to go towards others with the movement of our hearts inspired by the name of Jesus. All the inner life of Mary Ward, her many journeys across the Continent in a time of war and in great suffering, all this was in response to the command of the Risen Lord: go, go ahead. All through her life Mary Ward went up the mountain which Jesus had appointed.

The mountain, what is the meaning of this? Reading the gospel we find various meanings. The mountain is before all else the place of prayer for Jesus, the place of solitude with His Father. If we do not climb the mountain of prayer, if we do not enter into the dialogue of Jesus with the Father, we will not find Him. The mountain is also the place of His great discourse, the new Sinai of the new Law. The mountain is then His word. To go up the mountain of Jesus means to walk on the majestic mountain of His word. The mountain of the transfiguration joins these two aspects: the transfiguration takes place while Jesus is praying but the transfiguration is also a revelation of the true message of Moses and the Prophets. "This is my beloved Son. Hear ye Him" said the voice of the Father at this moment. (Matt 17:5). The mountain appears again in two decisive moments of Jesus' life – at the beginning of His public life Satan "took Him up to a high mountain" and offered Him every power on earth on condition that He would fall prostrate and adore Satan and his powers. At the end of His life we find Jesus lifted up on the mount of Calvary. The Crucifix is the reply to Satan's offer. "Adore the Lord

your God and to Him only render worship". On the cross Jesus witnessed with His very life to this word. The cross is the radical carrying out of the first commandment. The cross is the adoration of God alone. From the cross comes the perfect glorification of God on earth. The apparition of the Risen Jesus on the mountain shows us the deep connection between the first and the last mountain in the life of Jesus. On the first mountain Jesus had refused the power offered Him by Satan. Now the Risen Jesus says: "All power is given to me on earth and in heaven". Now He has power not only on earth but also in heaven and only He who has power in heaven can have full power on earth. But the one who gives this power is the Risen Lord, the one who has first accepted the cross and death. The crucifix has true power over the world, the power of love.

"Go to the mountain which Jesus has appointed": this phrase expressed the inner life of Mary Ward. All her life was a going towards a mountain chosen by Jesus. Consequently, this life was always more and more a going towards the mountain of the cross, in a double obedience, to her own personal vocation received from the Lord and to His Church, a place appointed by Him in the world. Her life was lived with little apparent success, her death in the obscurity of the cross, and thus she came to share in the power of the Lord, the power of love which illumines the world.

I would like to point out two other key words in our Gospel reading: "Go then and teach all nations... teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you". Go and teach. Again we find this "Go", now with the words of the same Risen One. And whereas the angel had said simply "Go quickly and tell ... He is risen", He Himself, the Risen Lord, extends His mandate to all nations in keeping with His universal power. All must come to know their Lord, the Lord of heaven and earth; all must know the truth, the only possible salvation for man who is created not for this or that interest but for the same truth. With this explanation of those whom this announcement concerns there is also necessarily a clarification of the contents: instead of "go and tell", the Lord says "go and teach". The word of the angel referred to the disciples and already presumed the decision to follow. To teach means to make disciples. It is not a matter of giving a mere message, of an intellectual communication only. But to understand this message there must be a communication of life because the message carries the root of that same life. This word demands a following, the condition of discipleship. Only one who has become a disciple with his whole life can communicate the message and the communication involves an introduction to the communion of disciples.

The Gospel word presumes a "we": the 'we' of disciples. With this command Jesus created His Church, designated His mountain. One cannot go alone and communicate this message to isolated persons. To teach means to go together and to lead others into the communion of the disciples of the Risen Lord. In becoming a disciple of Jesus, one accepts the mystery of His Church, of the mountain chosen by Him. Mary Ward had a deep understanding of this ecclesiological dimension of Jesus' message. Even when she saw her work destroyed by the authority of the Church she remained obedient, remained, in a rebellious age, firmly anchored in the Catholic Church. She understood, not only intellectually but with her heart, the saying of Jesus: "One man sows and another reaps" (Jn 4:37). Such is the hope and the patience of the saints: they sow in the field of the Church not for a brief personal success but for the age to come. They know that they themselves live on the sowings of others; the grain of wheat which dies for us becomes fruit for all ages. Thus with peace and the confidence of faith, they entrust their seed to the holy soil of the Church of God. So Mary Ward suffered much from the Church authorities who failed to understand her charism. But she knew, all the same, that it was only in the womb of the Church that the seed confided to her by the Lord would find a place of security and fecundity because only in then permanent communion of disciples can be found the field which lasts throughout the ages, where

one sows and another reaps but nothing remains without fruit. Outside this field one could have great personal success, but all these rapid successes in the end are nothing but passing moments and death. The fruit of life can develop and increase only by patient maturing in the right soil.

The Church caused Mary Ward great suffering but at the same time the Church was, and remained for her, her surest consolation and peace, the ground of all ages, the guarantee of the truth of the promise: one sows and another reaps.

Finally we find in the mandate of the Risen Lord the words: "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you". Faith involves a teaching and a moral behaviour based on the commandments of God. Faith is not a vague sentiment of transcendent and inexpressible realities; faith is formed in the heart of man but from this source of the heart the intellect and the will are also formed. Faith requires a continual formation of the whole personality, a readiness to learn throughout all one's life, to remain a disciple in the school of Christ. Teaching is a Christian vocation, a work of mercy, because lack of truth, lack of knowledge, is a type of poverty greater than purely material poverty.

In our times there has emerged a notion of teaching that is purely intellectual. Every attempt to form the person on a vision of the truth of our being would be taken as an attack on the liberty and self-determination of the individual. Such a position would be adequate did there not exist a truth which precedes our life. But in this hypothesis also, the autonomous decision of the individual remains an absurdity and ends in emptiness. If instead there does exist a truth about our very being, if our existence is realised in eternal truth, to make this truth known, to direct life along the path of this truth is the true act of liberation for man, a liberation from absurd emptiness to the fullness of his destiny.

Mary Ward found her own vocation in this word of the Lord: teach them to observe. And with her charism she understood that one cannot teach the faith without forming the whole person, a totally human culture. On the other hand, she understood that every good teaching must be directed towards the art of being human and that the heart of this art is faith. I think it is the moment to thank the foundress Mary Ward and her daughters of these four centuries for their tireless work of pedagogy, of teaching anchored on the rock of faith. Only God knows the immense blessing which has come from this work and He too will reward all the effort, the patient sowing throughout so many generations. We pray that the Lord may stir up new vocations so that this sowing and reaping may continue.

In the first reading of this Mass we see how Moses behaved before God: "He quickly bowed right down to the ground and prostrated himself". This is an act of adoration, an attitude of availability to the will of God, a prefiguration of the final act of Jesus. In His Passion He was truly bent down to the ground, and on the cross He was prostrate unto death. In his openness to the will of God Moses became the precursor of Christ. By this act he became capable of hearing and understanding the word of God; he became the interpreter of God among the people. But to understand better, to become a surer guide on the way to God, he asked to see God face to face. The reply was: You cannot see my face, you can only see my back. Man cannot see the face of God, he can only see His back. A great but mysterious saying. What does this mean? St Gregory of Nyssa has given a wonderful interpretation of this divine answer. He says: we only see the back of a person who goes before us. That you cannot see God's face but only God's back means then: you see God only by following Him. God always goes before us. He precedes us as the Crucified and Risen Lord. In this life we see only the crucified one – God's back. Walking in His steps we see God, we are on the path of truth. With these reflections we have come back to the picture of the child, Mary Ward. The first steps of

the little one followed the sound of the name of Jesus, and Mary Ward remained all her life on this path. In her earthly life she saw only God's back; she shared in the Passion of the Lord through her sufferings with and for the Church. But because of this, she knew she was always safe on the road of salvation, the road of the Resurrection.

Let us ask God to help Mary Ward's daughters, to help us all, to walk in the steps of Jesus and to go to His mountain and really to experience in this way the truth of His promise: "I will be with you all days, even to the end of the world". (Matt 28:20).