

## **400 YEARS OLD – BUT YOUNG IN HEART**

Sisters of the Congregatio Jesu Celebrate the Anniversary of Their Order in Rome

Through a Symposium, a General Audience, and a Festive Mass the former “English Ladies” have celebrated the anniversary of their order and demonstrated their unceasing dynamism

It was a colorful, cheerful celebration of encounter to which members of the Congregatio Jesu, long better known as the “English Ladies,” had come. Also present were Sisters of the Loreto Community, as well as Companions of the Order and Representatives of the Mary-Ward-Schools. Sisters from 37 countries and all continents met in a cordial and in the best sense of the word sisterly fashion. They came from Albania and South Korea, from Australia, India and Zimbabwe, from England, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania. Many have known each other for years, and many work across boundaries in the spirit of that woman, who 400 years ago elevated a vision of September 1609 into a life-task to establish a new path of spiritual life for women. She did this with a number of companions, founding a path that within the Catholic Church proved stony and laborious.

For a few moments the street-chaos of Rome was halted, as a group of sisters in 17<sup>th</sup>-century habits, together with a group of pilgrims that had walked in stages from Louvain to Rome since 2003, entered the city at the Piazza del Popolo, as Mary Ward herself did on 24 December 1621. At that time Mary Ward had covered the 2000 km in 70 days. Even if the joy of the encounter exceeded all limits, everyone was aware that in 1621 a bitter path of suffering was beginning for Mary Ward. She trod that path with infinite trust in God and a great inner freedom based on that trust right up to the papal bull that dissolved her houses and “abolished” her society. At that time a community living an Apostolic mission outside of the cloister did not fit the thinking of church authorities.

Those gathered in Rome looked not only at the past but also at the Congregatio Jesu today and tomorrow, and they looked with undiminished confidence at the many sisters who work in education in the spirit of Mary Ward. And where sisters are not active, schools are managed in her spirit. Sister Gemma Simmonds CJ of London proposed to the conference a vision which presents Mary Ward for today and tomorrow: Whoever lives and works in the spirit of the Founder, whether in a long tradition or for just a few years, carries that heritage with them. In today’s context this heritage offers a powerful answer to the situation of women in the entire world. Sister Mary Wright IBVM from Australia invited people to reflect on Mary Ward’s kindly fearlessness and patient generosity. Mary Ward’s advice was to follow God, not to run ahead of him. Thus she became a “prophet for a future that was not her own.” Sister Martha Zechmeister gave heart to those sisters, whose communities are growing smaller. Slipping into the role of Mary Ward, she declared, “Don’t let yourselves lose a sense of humor. Don’t cling desperately. None of your love gets lost. Whoever seeks to gain and to cling, loses.”

Much within these visions and messages is and remains very much alive. That could be seen everywhere in Rome during the days of celebration, whether at the general papal audience in St. Peter’s Square, or at the festive mass, which Sister Avita Bichlmaier with her Mary Ward Choir from Altötting co-performed with great musical expressiveness, or during the guided tours on Mary Ward’s paths in Rome, or above

all in the huge gathering at the Generalate of the Order, where everyone rejoiced, spoke, prayed and sang together. Here it became only too clear: This Society lives its visions, and this society is young, with its message of inner freedom for everyone, above all for women, who make an impact with body and soul. At present there are 1,923 sisters worldwide, of whom 553 belong to the Central European province.

Dr. Hans Würdinger

Two Captions

“In costumes of Mary Ward’s times sisters and pilgrims enter Rome.”

“Musical Ambassadors in Rome: Sister Avita Bichlmaier and the Mary-Ward-Choir of Altötting perform with expressive singing in the Festive Mass in the Church of Sant’Ignazio.”

**We thank Dr. William Johnston for the translation of this newspaper article.**