

## With courage and decisiveness she opened the way...

The news of Mary Ward's death in 1645 in York in England must have allowed the Inquisition officials to breathe a sigh of relief. This woman had claimed women could be trusted to be both religious sisters and active in the world. She had set up schools across Europe for girls, teaching them to read, write, learn other languages and be confident in public speaking. She had sent young women back into England, where to be Catholic was to be a traitor, and urged them to explain the faith in such a way as to help men and women to hold fast to their beliefs.

The officials in Rome knew that such works were, as the Papal Bull of Suppression of the Institute claimed in 1631: "...most unsuited to their weak sex and character, to female modesty and particularly to maidenly reserve... and that she and her followers "arrogantly and obstinately disobey our paternal and salutary warnings to the grave disadvantage of their own souls and the disgust of all good people".

*Mary Ward (right) © Geistliches Zentrum Maria Ward Augsburg, Foto Tanner, Nesselwang\**



This Bull had suppressed her Institute: "We destroy and annul them, and we wish and command all the Christian faithful to regard and repute them as suppressed, extinct, rooted out, destroyed and abolished." Their houses across Europe had been closed, and ongoing contact with each other forbidden. Later, by special papal leniency, a remnant had been allowed to gather around Mary, but not as religious sisters. Now with the 'founder' gone, the Inquisition and Roman Curia could rest peacefully, knowing that their interpretation of religious life for women as necessarily behind walls and under the secure guidance of a male authority, would hold firm.

This year in 45 countries across the world, members of Mary Ward's Congregations, co-workers, thousands of students and friends celebrate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding courage of Mary and her companions, who dared to dream this new way of life for women. Her companions continued to educate girls, and despite orders to burn all records of Mary Ward's role in their lives, repeatedly asked for recognition as a congregation. This came in the 1700s, but only on condition they severed connection with the name and story of Mary Ward. In 1909 Pope Pius X finally recognised that Mary as the founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As the circle turns, the story of this woman gains relevance in our Church. As Cardinal Ratzinger said in 1984 "With courage and decisiveness she opened the way in her own time for women to work in a new way in the Church....It may be said, perhaps, that precisely now Mary Ward's hour has come."

Mary was born in 1585, into England of Elizabeth I and Shakespeare. In a period of harsh persecution for Catholics, Mary grew up in households where women played a leading role in supporting the spiritual lives of those in their care. Convents no longer existed in England, but stories were told of women who had made God the focus of their lives. Mary was attracted to this possibility. Despite resistance from family and spiritual advisers, Mary sought this way of life. After two attempts cloistered living, in 1609 she realised that God was calling her to something other, something more for the glory of God.

Mary and her companions believed God called them to model their way of life on the Society of Jesus, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in the 1530s. The freedom of this way of life was unheard of for women. Mary saw 'freedom, justice and sincerity', as crucial for women if they were to serve responsibly and apostolically beyond the enclosure demanded by tradition. She was convinced that truth or 'verity', was crucial to friendship, to all conversation and action. Her way of ensuring this integrity was to reflect daily on her own experience and place this against her passionate commitment to a loving God. She grounded her life by asking: what does God want of me here, in this instance? Her strong sense that God had a purpose in her life ensured that she used all her gifts to put forward this new possibility for women. She carried these weighty virtues with a light heart- believing 'mirth is next to grace' in hard times.

Whether working underground in England with adults, or educating girls in cities across Europe, for the thirty years following 1609 Mary never wavered in her belief that this way of life was possible for women who were vowed as religious in the Church. She also never wavered in her belief that the Catholic Church was her home and God could work finally through it. Her focus was always: how can we help families and individuals deepen their faith, come to know Jesus more, and do this in a way that frees rather than infantilises, that reaches out to social needs, that ensures that the gifts given to women are used to the full and not limited because men tell us we are 'but women'. Her plan attracted derision, fear and downright rejection from Jesuits, from English clergy, from Government spies and from the Roman Curia.

400 years later in Calcutta, students from a Loreto school go out one day each week to teach other young children to read and write. In Ghana, in 2005, Kenyan IBVM sisters established a school for girls in a region where only boys had access to schooling. The enrolment is now close to 300. In Australia, women take their rightful place as engineers, lawyers, doctors, artists, teachers and contribute to society as mothers, carers, politicians and friends, drawing on an education that has given them confidence, hope and fostered a vision that calls them beyond consumerism and self-aggrandisement. Others give money, or time and talents as volunteers, through Mary Ward International, the development arm that Loreto sisters have established. Through their NGO at the United Nations, Mary Ward women work with other religious congregations to raise awareness around food, peace, and the place of women, in the hope of changing structures that destroy.

The driving power for these works is clearly the Good News brought to us in Jesus Christ. But the particular emphases that emerge in the approach of our sisters and colleagues to sharing this Gospel come from the life of this one woman: Mary Ward.

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