

Mary Ward and Catholic Education for Today Dr Leoni Degenhardt PhD FACE FACEL

This year we celebrate the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the religious order which Mary Ward established and which we know in Australia as the Loreto sisters. This remarkable woman made major contributions to religious life and to education for women. Who was she and how are her educational ideas still relevant to schools everywhere in our 21st century world?

Mary Ward was born in England in 1585 into an upper class Catholic family, in a time of fierce religious passion and bigotry. Like many Englishwomen from the higher classes, Mary Ward enjoyed greater freedom and independence than was available to women in most Catholic countries at that time. Contrary to the norm for women in those times (Rofe, 1985), she had received a balanced classical education. Surrounded by strong recusant women who upheld the Catholic faith within their homes and communities in the face of persecution, imprisonment or execution, Mary Ward grew up with a firm belief in the capacity of women to contribute significantly to both Church and society. Cameron (2000) claims, in fact, that one of the consequences of the lack of a formal Catholic church hierarchy in England during the Reformation was the opportunity it gave to lay people, both men and women, to exercise initiative. It is therefore not surprising that Mary Ward was open to new ideas.

The many schools throughout England and Europe that she and her companions established were notable for their educational innovations (Cameron, 2000). The broad liberal education they offered was holistic in approach, emphasised the creative arts and respected intellectual rigour and breadth. Her curriculum included not only modern languages but also drama, dancing and music. Mary Ward considered that the creative and performing arts were of great value in helping people to understand and appreciate their essential humanity. These inclusions were most avant-garde when we recall the era – even in Shakespeare's plays female roles were performed by men. This is a timely reminder for today when so often these areas of curriculum are cut back in favour of the 'essentials' which are subject to standardised testing regimes.

Mary Ward sought to form habits of reflection and discernment in making choices and 'referring all things to God'. She also emphasised the need for deep joy, or felicity. As she said to her sisters: 'In our calling, a cheerful mind, a good understanding, and a great desire after virtue are necessary, but of all three a cheerful mind is the most so' (Cameron, 2000, p.208). These too are important reminders when 21st century life is increasingly fast, often vacuous and leading to depression.

There was also an understanding that 'the teaching under the teaching' is important: sincere relationships were central to the learning and development of all in the school community. The adults provided sound modelling, trying to influence their students more by their example than by their words. They repeatedly inculcated in one another the importance of loving their students (Rofe, 1985), of knowing them as individuals, of enjoying a respectful *familiaritas* with them (Cameron, 2000). What Mary Ward instinctively knew, today's learning theory and educational professionals continue to promote. Effective learning is greatly assisted by – perhaps cannot occur without – sound and supportive relationships between teacher and student.

Mary Ward encouraged the pursuit of excellence, not in a competitive or perfectionist sense, but through doing one's best and then relying on God to do the rest. Also significant in her educational endeavours were a commitment to social justice, and adaptations of curriculum and structures to meet the needs of particular community circumstances. Hence, she set up trade schools to enable girls from poor families to learn a means of earning their living in ways other than prostitution.

Typical of Mary Ward's system of education were the following attributes:

- Striving after the truth; and training in self-discipline so that all in the school would realise their duties towards God, others and themselves;
- The expectation of a high standard of bearing and behaviour from all students;
- Training in character together with religious formation, with no place for strictness or rigidity;
- Valuing the cooperation of parents in the work of education;
- Insistence on the appropriate qualifications of teachers;
- General culture as well as solid education were equally valued; and
- The willingness to adapt methods, while retaining ideals (Wright, 1981).

Although she would not have recognised the term, Mary Ward was a proponent of holistic education. 'Her philosophy of education was both Christian and humanistic, as she had a high regard for secular learning as a civilizing experience, and a Christian concern for the dignity of the individual' (Wright, 1981, p.33). She educated the whole child within the context of the wider world.

Indeed Mary Ward strove to educate in and for society, not apart from it. In her view, 'education was an advantage not a danger' (Rofe, 1985, p.12), and her emphasis on education as liberation resonated with the high value she placed on 'freedom' (Rofe, 1985).

Mary Ward also accepted the challenge of change: a faithful Catholic, she was nevertheless committed to genuine reform and renewal of the Church at all times (McClory, 2000). She was referred to pejoratively as 'a dangerous innovator'. Like Mary McKillop after her, this resulted in her excommunication from the Church. However, we in today's world and today's Church can take heart from her prayerfulness, her faith, her loyalty, her courage and her willingness to take risks. Mary Ward's emphasis on a broad, liberal education, incorporating warm, caring relationships and academic rigour, are exactly what our students need 400 years later, in a continent she had never imagined existed.

This year we celebrate not only Mary Ward herself but the work of the many followers of Mary Ward, the sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) and the Companions of Jesus (CJ), who have carried on her visionary work in the education of women and works of social justice across the centuries and across the world.

References

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23 April 2009

IBVM and CJ Websites:

Loreto Sisters Australia www.loreto.org.au

IBVM Generalate: www.ibvm.org

CJ England: www.cjengland.org