

Mary Ward remembered in Holy City, 400 years on

By **Gerry O'Connell**
Rome Correspondent

CELEBRATIONS have been held in Rome marking the entrance into the city almost 400 years ago of Mary Ward, the English founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Congregation of Jesus.

A group of her pilgrim followers dressed in 17th century costumes walked through the Flaminian Gate, just as she had done in 1621 to petition the Pope to approve her order.

The extraordinary spectacle took place on Monday under a

blazing sun when, much to the amazement of Romans and tourists alike, a group of her pilgrim sisters led by a young sister playing a flute, walked through the gate and processed into Rome's famous Piazza del Popolo.

A great, rousing cheer broke the silence in the piazza as 1,000 male and female members of Mary Ward's order — also known as the Loreto order — gathered near the obelisk in the centre of the

square, hailing the arrival of the pilgrims.

The group which enacted her historic entry through the Flaminian Gate came from Germany and Austria and, over the last six summers, they have walked every step of the historic 2,000km journey that Mary Ward made from Liege to Rome in 1621.

Wearing yellow scarves and carrying small yellow pilgrim bags, the group waiting to greet them applauded enthusiastically.

cally and waved flags of the 37 countries they had come from and where Mary Ward's order now has houses.

The pilgrims moved across the piazza to join them in a liturgy to celebrate the founding of Mary Ward's institute of religious women in 1609.

The hour-long liturgy, which was arranged by Sr Deirdre Brown from Melbourn, had a distinctly festive air: "This is the day for rejoicing, this is the day for jubilation, for singing

our song of praise," she said. Speaking in English, German, Spanish as well as other languages, the pilgrims recalled the historic moment of their founder's entry to the eternal city on Christmas Eve, 1621.

They read passages from the Sacred Scriptures and Mary Ward's own writings, and they sang with great gusto *Gloria, Gloria in Excelsis Deo!*

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Celebrations in Rome as Mary Ward's journey remembered

Below: Pilgrims arrive through the Flaminian Gate in Rome (Pic by: GERRY O'CONNELL)

Right: One of the pilgrims dressed in period costume (Pic by: THOMAS JABLOWSKI)



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The liturgy "gives expression to the universality and internationality of the order. Mary Ward founded — the sisters who are known as the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary," Sr Deirdre told *The Universe*.

Mary Ward was once denounced as a heretic and imprisoned while her order was suppressed, yet she is now on the threshold of beatification.

Asked what message this celebration has for the Church today, Sr Deirdre responded: "Good women will not lie down and die.

"The Church needs to learn from and listen to women. And we who are women in the Church have to live our lives with faith and courage and believe in the future."

Some 130 sisters came from the UK and Ireland for the 400th anniversary celebrations, carrying the Union Flag and the Irish tricolor.

Sr Mary Luke Addyman, superior of the Cambridge community who also works in the hospital in the East Anglian city, told *The Universe*: "This is truly a wonderful experience. It says that what was once apparently dead and forgotten has sprung into life."
Sr Gemma Simmonds, an English sister who lectures in

theology at Heythrop College, London, told *The Universe*: "We have sisters here who have survived under communism in Romania, Albania and elsewhere, as well as sisters who are working in the Amazon region of Brazil and in Africa."

She then embraced the superior of the order in Brazil and sisters from Amazonia.

"Four hundred years ago, Mary Ward saw what women could do in the Church and where women in time to come would go. She understood, too, how important the education of women is for the future of the world," Sr Gemma added.

Miracle

She said she dreamed that when Pope Benedict visits England next year, he would not only celebrate the beatification of John Henry Newman, but also that of Mary Ward — who is expected to be declared Venerable before the end of 2009 or early 2010.

As for the miracle needed for beatification, she believes the very existence of the order is the greatest miracle.

During the week-long celebrations, the sisters attended the Pope's audience in the Vatican on October 7 (the pontiff was once a child in one of their kindergartens in Bavaria).