



“Women in time will do much”

Mary Ward’s life and spirit inspires today



Mary Ward was born in York on the 23rd January 1585. Convinced that she was drawn to some form of life devoted to God and neighbour, she pioneered a new way for religious women. Mary and her early companions, sought to show that women could educate, explain the faith, bring people back to the love of God and support them in times of crisis. In her time, educating women was seen as extraordinary.

The church leaders of the day were unnerved by her vision, which conflicted with their expectations of women. They condemned her and her works and disbanded the fledgling order. Mary continued to pray for them and to trust that if this work was of God, God would ensure it prospered. She remained convinced that "women in time to come will do much". She died in York in 1645, urging her companions to trust in their vocation and let it be "constant, efficacious and loving".

Her companions persevered in their lifestyle and works and other women continued to find Mary's vision inspiring, until finally the authorities had to admit that this was a way of discipleship blessed by God. It was not until the twentieth century that Mary Ward herself was recognised in any way by Church Authority.

Mary Ward continues to inspire the work of the modern day Loreto Sisters whose missions encompass education, social welfare, social justice, pastoral care, aboriginal health and work with many disadvantaged groups both here and overseas. They promote the gifts of women in "*freedom, justice and sincerity*", in a way of life that places emphasis on reflection and action, to serve the gospel "*wherever the need is greatest*".

Sr Anna Gaha, of Kirribilli NSW, celebrates 50 years with the Loreto Sisters this year. She says that entering religious life with the Loreto Sisters in 1957 was the best decision she ever made. She always had a deep set need to help those less fortunate and this was the major motivation that led her to consider a religious life. Educated at Loreto Normanhurst NSW she relished in the spirit of Mary Ward and the individualism of the sisters there.

A free thinking person herself, she admired the sisters' devotion to freedom, a just and fair environment and the sincerity to be oneself and give so willingly. She emphasises that Sr Joan Nowotny epitomised the Mary Ward spirit for her when she was a primary school student and continues to inspire her today. "She and other sisters seemed so happy and fulfilled in who they were and what they did. They were so accepting and loving of all."

Joining the Loreto Sisters gave her the opportunity to live out a religious life devoted to God, helping those in need and at the same time pursuing her interests in education and social welfare. She has devoted her life to education, community welfare and social work. She has held various teaching positions and/or principal terms at a number of schools across Australia including St Peter and Paul's South Melbourne 1959-64, St Aloysius Ballarat 1971-73, Loreto Normanhurst NSW 1975 -76, Loreto Marryatville 1977 – 81, St Marks of Fawkner (Victoria)1983-87 and Holy Family School Parafield South Australia 1988-93.

She describes with much enthusiasm her experience of being sent to Perth in 1965 to open a school in a remote town 20kms from the city. Her passion and drive is very clear. "We were sent out from the convent to open a school for underprivileged children in Thornlie. There was nothing there, no desks, no pencils. We had to build it up from scratch. Teaching outside the convent was unheard of at the time and even more so was setting out and establishing a school on our own! But we worked hard and we did it." This experience gave her a strong foundation, helping her to pursue her love of education.



Loreto Sisters celebrating their jubilees in 2007.

Back row (L-R): Sr Hilary Blackie, Sr Anna Gaha, Sr Marg Honner.

Front row (L-R): Sr Jan Barlow, Sr Mary Shelley

She describes her greatest achievement as being her recent time in Kwa Guqa, a Zulu township 120 kilometres from Johannesburg, South Africa. She visited the township every year for a month for three consecutive years in order to set up two literacy units/libraries for the local primary schools and reflects on it as a most extraordinary experience.

“These people had nothing but their colour, dance, music and art was brilliant. I learnt so much about living in a different culture and also about the great gifts of joy and enthusiasm that these people have in their lives.” She fondly recounts a Rotary art competition the students entered in hope of funding for their first library.

“I brought the students paint and paint brushes from Australia and they had no idea what they were or what to do with them. They preferred to draw their pictures with kindergarten crayons. Their drawings wonderfully captured the competition theme of being helpful in their community. Our school was the winning entrant. Everyone was so proud - it was such an empowering moment. We secured the much needed funding and it meant that the library was their project and had been achieved thanks to their hard work.”

In her current role as Family Liaison at St Joachim's School in Lidcombe, West of Sydney Sr Anna supports 'children at risk'. She describes this risk as the possibility of children 'falling through the school system' with very limited literacy, thereby not achieving their full potential.

She also spends her time supporting families and children in need – at the moment she is helping a homeless Tongan family consisting of single mother and six children find appropriate accommodation and care in Western Sydney. Together with Sr Elizabeth Johnson she has been transporting the family to network support communities in the area – to look for schools, to access basic home goods etc.

Sr Anna has always loved the places and people she has met; they form the mosaic of her life as a Loreto Sister devoted Mary Ward's values of freedom, sincerity and justice.

“I have always searched for my own answer for what it means to be a Mary Ward woman. I think it means to be fully human and ordinary and simply and naturally oneself, witnessing the values that come out of our vows in a society that distorts them with greed and ambition, desperate want and an empty understanding of what it means to grow and love. The words I love most are from Mary Ward's retreats notes in 1619:

“This seemed to be the WAY. That people would first KNOW it, after that DESIRE it, then ENDEAVOUR for it a little and that GOD would do the rest.”