

Mary Ward: Then and now

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Celebrations to mark the 400th anniversary of Mary Ward's foundation of the first unenclosed religious order of women on the Jesuit model continue this weekend with a Mass at Westminster Cathedral. Gemma Simmonds CJ looks at the life and writings of this woman of 'heroic virtue' who wanted to secure a better role for women in the Church and in society, and at how this struggle continues today. Why is Mary's vision for women, yet to be fully realised, still a vital goal to strive for?

In December 2009 Pope Benedict XVI formally promulgated a Decree recognising the 'heroic virtue' demonstrated by Mary Ward, conferring on her the title 'Venerable' and setting in motion her cause for canonisation. This judgement reverses that of Pope Urban VIII who condemned her as a 'heretic, schismatic and rebel to Holy Church' and her sisters as 'poisonous growths in the Church of God [which] must be torn up from the roots lest they spread themselves further'.

Born in 1585, Mary Ward belonged to an underground Catholic network, working collaboratively with itinerant priests to maintain the persecuted faith. In the absence of clergy she and many recusant women exercised spiritual and practical authority within their communities. Despite the Council of Trent's ruling that all female religious should be enclosed, she led a group of young women to Flanders in 1609 to begin a consecrated life on the Jesuit model.

Their educational and pastoral ministries across Europe were characterised by Jesuit mobility and missionary focus, attracting admirers and enemies in equal measure. A Jesuit remarked that, while Mary Ward's 'English Ladies' were remarkable for their fervour, 'when all is done, they are but women', so they were bound to fail. Mary insisted instead that 'there is no such difference between men and women,



Picture: Studio Tanner, Nesselwang, Germany

that women may not do great things'. After Mary's death in 1645 her surviving sisters held fast to her vision. In the nineteenth century, Irishwoman Teresa Ball made further pioneering foundations which spread worldwide as the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary or Loreto Sisters. Formal vindication came only in 1877, when Mary Ward's congregation was recognised by the Church and in 1909, when she was allowed to be named as foundress.

Today she is honoured and studied as an English woman writer, a pioneering educator and above all as an apostolic woman who loved the Church but challenged it to think and act beyond its own theological categories. But as celebrations of the 400th anniversary of Mary Ward's foundation of a religious order continue, with a solemn Mass in Westminster Cathedral this weekend to be attended by thousands, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, questions remain regarding the position of women in Church and society.

Women in society

There is, of course, no single recognisable generic category of 'women', as such. Neither Mary Ward in her time nor we in ours can speak in globalising terms of women and women's experience. But the 2008 UNIFEM report on *The Progress of the World's Women* reminds us of the situation in which many women

find themselves four hundred years on from Mary Ward's founding vision.¹ The Millennium Development Goals agreed to by the United Nations in 2000 contain a commitment to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. In many countries, women's disadvantage is based on their subordinate status in relation to men as decision-makers and power-holders. Their voices and choices are silenced by the assumption that male needs and preferences are the norm, so that the way women experience the world, their desires and choices are ignored, their ability to assert or exercise their rights restricted. Women may be denied educational opportunities, access to public services, political representation, financial independence and rights in work and in law.

Gender biases and the exclusion of women in public affairs often follow unconscious cultural patterns within secular legislation and within the Church itself. When silent women find their voice, it not only makes for greater social equality, but for a richer experience of human society. Mary Ward's understanding that investing in the care and education of women is an investment in the future of an entire nation is part of her legacy to the Church and to the world. She pioneered a form of religious life for women in the Church which became the blueprint for many subsequent congregations. These groups of women often spearheaded social and educational movements which enabled women to take a fuller and more equal part in public and private life. The global net enrolment rate of females in education has increased worldwide by almost 10% in the last decade, but much remains to be done to ensure that girls finish primary and secondary school, and to bring more non-enrolled girls into the educational system. Where women are educated, their rights are more respected and their voice becomes a power for challenge and change.

In the field of health, women's position remains precarious. Globally, over half a million women every year die during pregnancy or childbirth. We are witnessing the feminisation of the HIV/AIDS pandemic: three out of every five adults living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa are women. It is a tragedy that a massive *impasse* has developed between the Church's teaching on sexual ethics and secular campaigns for women's rights. In their insistence on

women's 'reproductive rights' it has become virtually impossible for most secular agencies to hear with an open mind the Church's insistence on the sacredness of human life from conception to death. On the other hand it has become increasingly difficult for Catholic theologians and providers of health services to represent the real experience and urgent needs of women, or to enter into respectful dialogue on these questions, without being reprimanded for perceived infidelity to the Magisterium. Pope Benedict XVI's recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, reminds us of the necessary 'link between life ethics and social ethics', pointing to the inherent contradiction in societies where, on the one hand, the dignity of the person is upheld while 'ways in which human life is devalued and violated' are tolerated (*CiV* 15). The life of women and girls continues to be devalued and violated worldwide, however, and many of them perceive the Church as being unwilling or unable to offer a realistic answer to their difficulties.

Mary Ward questioned the very basis of definitions that considered women mentally, physically and morally inferior, contesting them even when they apparently legitimised by theology and ecclesial authority,

...Wherein are we so inferior to other creatures, that they should term us but women [...] as if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man, which I dare be bold to say is a lie, and with respect [...] may say it is an error'.²

She refused to accept a situation in which reality was defined and described through the dominance of male experience and perceptions. Then and now, such an approach not only excludes the concerns specific to women, but also fails to take seriously their experience as a category for interpreting reality itself. This silencing of women and women's experience continues to be a form of disempowerment with which women struggle in many contexts. Mary's conviction that women are called to 'do great things' for God, to be educators and educated, apostles and communicators of faith, was a revolution not just in terms of the Church but in terms of an entire culture. She understood that the exclusion of women's voices and women's experience from public discourse lay at the heart of their oppression within society, and was contrary to the mind of God.

The Glory Vision

While living in London after two failed attempts to live the monastic life, Mary experienced her famous 'Glory Vision'. She was seeking God's will, knowing only that she and 'women in time to come' were called to some other thing, as yet unknown and untried. The answer came while looking in a mirror, when she heard the words 'Glory, glory, glory' ringing in her ears.³ The glory of God, says St. Irenaeus, is a human being fully alive. As she looked at her own reflection in the mirror, Mary saw what she also heard – the glory of God, shining through her human weakness. It is the glory given by God to women of the future who will fulfil what God created them capable of being, overcoming all the human, social and spiritual impoverishment imposed on them by the forces of patriarchy. This vision holds up before the women of the world the mirror of God in which they can see their own reflection, made beautiful and glorious by the grace of creation given to each one.

Love, fear and freedom

In Mary's writings we find frequent reference to the effects on the female psyche of love, fear and freedom. She prays that her readers might be blessed with a spirit of truth, enabling them to 'discern things as they are in themselves, the difference between trifles and matters of importance'.⁴ Much of the male polemic in history against women and women's judgment refers to the alleged female tendency to act and judge while dominated by unreliable feelings. This has the effect, for many women, of undermining their respect for their own context, their experience and their perceptions. While fully aware of the possibility of self-deception, Mary learned to value her own experience as a category to be taken seriously when making judgments.⁵ She called this capacity for discernment a 'happy begun freedom, the beginning of all my good, and more worth to me [...] than the whole world besides'.⁶

In her instructions to her sisters she claims that the 'will to do well' is not a matter of gender or natural aptitude, 'there is no such difference between men and women'.⁷ For her the enemy of fervour is not gender but the pervasive human attraction to idolatry and false goods. Even education and knowledge themselves can become idols, if sought for their own sake

rather than for the end of all knowledge, which is God.⁸ This perception is echoed by *Caritas in Veritate*, 'Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love.' (2).

In contradiction to a belief of her time that God was principally to be found in extraordinary graces and experiences, Mary valued the ordinary and the domestic as a proper context for growth in holiness and human fulfilment.⁹ Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara speaks of the way in which the daily domestic life of many women has been dismissed and disregarded, as if it could never be the context for spiritual reflection.¹⁰ Fear and a lack of confidence engendered by the trivialisation of women's perspective and experience leads many to consider that they count for little. The 400-year-old Mary Ward heritage contributes to the empowerment of women by eradicating both pointless fear and misplaced love.

This is not about the replacement of male chauvinism by the female version. The empowerment of women has incalculable effects on the wellbeing of men. Sexism and patriarchy can heap intolerable burdens on many men, forcing them into oppressive relationships in which they also, ironically, become victims. A more balanced and mutually respectful and responsible relationship between the genders ultimately benefits men as much as women. It has the potential to create domestic and social solidarity and prosperity and to liberate both genders from roles that are toxic and demeaning.

The Vision of the Just Soul

In 1615 Mary received a vision of a 'Just Soul', characterised by a 'singular freedom' from the idolatries and addictions of this world. This freedom renders us apt for 'all good works', so that we do not limit encounter with God to some special and 'holy' sphere, but experience God precisely in the ordinariness of our human existence. The just soul is characterised by a confidence and transparency which makes it possible for us to 'be such as we appear, and appear such as we are', without fear or disguise. Mary saw this state as a return to humanity's original justice, sincerity and innocence.

Mary Ward's is an integrated and holistic vision which speaks powerfully to many women who are, by reason of the role they play in society, particularly close to nature itself. The empowerment of women has close connections with a respectful attitude towards the environment, living in harmony with the rest of the God-given, natural world. The impact of environmental degradation and climate change is falling increasingly heavily on poor women, as the unsustainable lifestyles of the affluent undermine the supply and quality of natural resources. The vision of the Just Soul suggests an answer to this drama of our times.

Caritas in Veritate states that, 'the book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development'. (51-52). A past pupil of a Mary Ward school, Benedict XVI has contrasted her feminism with a feminism he considers destructive of human solidarity. There is a danger in attempting to hijack her in favour of various contemporary agendas. But if her prophetic stance eventually brought about important changes, there remains much to be done within both Church and society. Despite the Church's discourse of equality in Christ, the fact remains that decision-making and power-holding remain largely tied to ministerial priesthood. An ecclesial reality defined and described through the dominance of male perceptions, however benign, can adversely affect the concerns specific to women and fail to take seriously their experience and aspirations.

Mary Ward's Glory Vision reminds us that God's glory is found in human beings, male and female, fully alive and open to service in new and untried ways. Her Vision of the Just Soul describes the harmony between humanity and nature in which each of us is called to a life of justice, transparency and right relationship. Finally her writings on love, fear and freedom remind us of the need to let go of all that is addictive, including the structures of power and dominance. As a resource for society and for the Church, after 400 years she still has a lot to offer.

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¹ <http://www.unifem.org/progress/2008/publication.html> referred to *passim* within this article.

² See Ursula Dirmeier, *Mary Ward und ihre Gründung: die Quellentexte bis 1645*, 1, (Münster, Aschendorff, 2007), pp.364-5 [spelling modernised]

³ No. 21 of a series of 50 paintings of Mary Ward's life and spiritual journey, executed in and shortly after her lifetime, shows the scene. See:

<http://www.loretonh.nsw.edu.au/faith/ourheritage/paintedlife.html>

⁴ Dirmeier, 1, p.12 (spelling and text modernised).

⁵ Ibid, p. 23.

⁶ Gillian Orchard, *Till God Will: Mary Ward through her Writings*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p.9.

⁷ Dirmeier 1, p. 364.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 363-4

⁹ Ibid, p. 359.

¹⁰ Ivone Gebara, 'Women and Spirituality: a Latin American Perspective' in *The Way*, 38, 1988, pp. 240-251.