

Pioneering educator who challenged Rome

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In 1951, during the first World Congress of the Lay Apostolate, Pope Pius XII paid tribute to a seventeenth-century Yorkshire woman, Mary Ward, calling her 'that incomparable woman, given to the church by Catholic England in her darkest and bloodiest hour'. His words went some way to heal the memory of the Bull *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis*, written by Urban VIII, in 1630. Nailed to the doors of the Lateran Basilica and St. Peter's, it spoke of the outrageous attempt by Mary and her 'Jesuitesses' to 'employ themselves at...works which are most unsuited to maidenly reserve...arrogantly and obstinately disobey[ing] our paternal and salutary warnings to the grave disadvantage of their own souls and the disgust of all good people'.

This week sees the modern-day English followers of Mary Ward in the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of their foundation with a Mass in York Minster.

All over the world thousands will honour the memory of England's foremost pioneer of female education, who laid the foundations for unenclosed, self-governing religious life for women, although she was denied the title of founder of her own congregations for the best part of three hundred years.



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

The Mass at York Minster points to a major shift in the unfolding story of Mary Ward, as well as in the wider story of ecumenism. The bitterness of religious persecution has given way to generosity and reconciliation. Her followers have received the warmest of welcomes at the heart of the Anglican establishment. What is being celebrated is not just the memory of a remarkable historical figure but the enduring legacy of her vision, so far in advance of its time. Born in 1585, Mary Ward lived during the worst period of persecution against recusant Catholics who refused to attend the state Church. Like fellow Yorkshire woman Margaret Clitherow, the women in Mary Ward's family belonged to underground Catholic networks. In general it

proved safer for women to remain Catholic (even though some, including Mary Ward's own grandmother often had to endure imprisonment as a result) whilst men conformed in order to save the family from the savage recusancy fines. In the absence of clergy and sacramental worship the faith was kept going in secret, with itinerant Jesuits celebrating the sacraments and teaching members of the household, including girls, Latin, Greek and Scripture. Many women became accustomed to working alongside these priests, exercising spiritual and practical leadership within their extended families and often sizeable households. Some would later become members of Mary Ward's pioneering congregation.

Three of Mary Ward's uncles died as a result of their involvement in the Gunpowder Plot and Mary herself was not above a spirited response when challenged. When a Jesuit expressed his conviction that women could not comprehend God, Mary ascribed his belief to his lack of experience, urging her companions to believe that women could 'do great matters'. She refused to accept that there were only two choices for women – either marriage or the cloister. Having tried - twice – to live the cloistered life as a Poor Clare she became convinced that God was calling her to another way of life, as yet unheard of in the Church and in 1609 she led a group of young women to Saint Omer to begin a consecrated life without enclosure.

Believing herself called to found a self-governing congregation for women on the lines of the Society of Jesus, with their Constitutions and characteristic mobility and missionary focus, between 1609 and 1630, she and her companions set up underground missionary networks in England and schools for girls all

across Europe, in cities as far apart as Liege and Pressburg (Bratislava) and taking in many others including Munich, Vienna, Rome and Naples. The Council of Trent had permitted no relaxation of enclosure for women, and St. Ignatius had insisted that there were never to be female Jesuits. Mary crossed the Alps on more than one occasion and mainly on foot, through plague and war, to petition the Pope for her new venture, but neither the Church nor society were prepared for someone who taught her sisters that "there is no such difference between men and women, that women may not do great things". Accusations arose of arrogance and immorality, of women aspiring to priestly roles. Epithets applied to them included "galloping girls", "wandering gossips" as well as the ubiquitous "Jesuitesses". One Jesuit remarked that, while Mary Ward's 'English Ladies' were remarkable for their fervour, "when all is done, they are but women", and their new venture was therefore bound to fail. Mary nevertheless remained firmly committed, both in word and deed, to her belief that a future full of hope and potential lay before women and "I hope in God it will be seen that women in time to come will do much". Imprisoned in 1631, as a result of Urban VIII's Bull, as a 'heretic, schismatic and rebel to Holy Church', Mary's dream of apostolic work for women was utterly condemned. At her death in 1645 it seemed that all that was left of this once bright hope, with the power to attract so many others, was dust and ashes.

However, her few surviving sisters clung on to her memory and her vision, eventually achieving grudging canonical approbation in 1749 on condition that Mary Ward herself was not claimed as founder of the order. Nineteenth-century Irishwomen Teresa Ball and Mary Aikenhead trained in the historic Bar

Convent, York, to make their own pioneering foundations which spread worldwide and Mother Teresa of Calcutta was a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary before founding her Missionaries of Charity. Formal vindication only came in 1909, when she was finally officially recognised by the Church as the foundress.

Today Mary Ward is honoured and studied as an English woman writer, a pioneering educator and above all as a woman who loved the Church but challenged it to think and act far beyond its own theological categories. Her vision for women flourishes even at the United Nations, where Mary Ward International has been an NGO since 2003. Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF recently pointed out that "There can be no significant transformation in societies and no reduction in poverty until girls receive the quality basic education they need to take their rightful place as equal partners in development."

Of the world's 875 million illiterate adults, almost two thirds are female. In more than 45 countries, fewer than 1 in 4 girls are enrolled in secondary school. Over 120 million children, two thirds of them girls, are denied a basic education. Across the world Mary Ward's followers are involved in both formal and non-formal education of girls and women from basic literacy programmes to university level. In Peru sisters run libraries and a computer centre for village students without books or electricity. A 20-acre farming collective is introducing a new system of irrigation that will put an end to women hauling water in buckets from the nearby river. There and elsewhere in shelters for battered women and campaigns for the elimination of domestic violence, traumatised women and children learn a new sense of their

own dignity and worth. Whether in Romanian orphanages, on a Hull housing estate, in a school for Palestinian girls in Jerusalem or in campaigns against female circumcision in Africa, Mary Ward's followers continue to work for women to have the chance to fulfil their potential and 'do great things'. In more privileged parts of the world young women in Mary Ward schools learn from her to accept the social and wider responsibility that comes with privilege, since "we must not only love our neighbour as ourself, but behave as if we do".

The cause for Mary Ward's canonisation recently took a major step forward and Pope Benedict XVI, a former pupil of the sisters in Bavaria, has expressed warm admiration for her. Perhaps the day is coming when another papal pronouncement will complete the vindication of one of England's greatest heroines, who to the end of her life lived out her admonition to her followers in the earliest days of her enterprise that "real strength and courage consists in doing what one knows to be good in all circumstances in which we are placed, and in not letting ourselves be deterred from this by any opposition". Not a bad lesson for any us...

Further information about the Mary Ward 400 year celebrations:

Loreto Australia: www.loreto.org.au

CJ England: www.cjengland.org