

MARY WARD'S DILEMMA

The Choice of a Rule

Mary Wright

IN 1611 MARY WARD received the illumination, 'heard distinctly, not by sound of voyce, but intellectually understood', of 'these wordes, Take the Same of the Society'. Although she wrote that 'these few wordes gave soe great measure of light in that perticuler Institute, comfort and strength, and changed soe the whole soule',¹ we know that they also brought her ongoing difficulties, disappointments and the frustration of all her plans at the human level. Certainly, for Mary and all her followers (and for many popes, cardinals, Jesuits and other eminent men) life would have been much easier if she had followed the example of Jeanne de Lestonnac in Bordeaux a few years earlier (1606). With the help of two Jesuits, Jeanne made an adaptation of the Jesuit Rule, affiliated her Company of Mary to the Benedictines, within a year had the Rule approved by Pope Paul V, and began establishing schools for girls all over France to combat what the Roman Catholic Church viewed as the heresy of Calvinism.

There are many questions about why Mary Ward '[took] the Same'. But I propose to explore the other side of the argument, and look at why Mary rejected the other available Rules so stubbornly. Since these Rules continue to be used in the Church, and are the basis of the vast majority of apostolic religious Institutes in existence today, why did Mary not find anything that appealed to her in any of them, and why did she conclude that 'they seemed not that which God would have done'?²

Leaving England

Mary Ward described the ten years between her realisation of her religious vocation at the age of fifteen, and her God-given inspiration to

¹ Mary Ward to Antonio Albergati, May/June 1621, in *Mary Ward (1585–1645): A Briefe Relation ... with Autobiographical Fragments and a Selection of Letters*, edited by Christina Kenworthy-Browne (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), 146.

² Mary Ward to Antonio Albergati, May/June 1621, 146.



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'Mary being then 21, she left home with her confessor's consent, and took ship to Saint-Omer', from the Painted Life of Mary Ward

'Take the same of the Society' as years of great difficulty and disturbance. There seem to have been three distinct sources of these difficulties. The first was the opposition of her family and wider circle of advisers, including spiritual directors, to her desire to go abroad to join a religious community. The second was her anxiety about which community to enter, because she had absolutely no direct experience of religious life for women as there were no convents at all in England. She writes:

Setting forth then upon the so greatly desired journey, and not yet out of England, a great obscurity darkened my mind and doubts rose up within me, as to where, and in what religious order I should have to settle, and in this darkness and disquiet of soul I crossed the sea³

Then followed her experiences in two Poor Clare communities, the first as a novice extern sister in a French-speaking community, the second as a choir novice in the community she herself founded in Flanders for English women. These ventures ended in apparent failure. She knew from the beginning that the first community was not for her, and that she

³ Mary Ward, 'The Italian Autobiography', in *Mary Ward (1585–1645)*, 125.

had been entrapped into it through her own naiveté and the deception of her advisers and superiors. Then she was uprooted from the second community by a distinct divine call, which left her certain that she must leave, but completely uncertain of where she should go next.

The third source of trouble and disturbance came in the next period of her life, beginning when she left the Poor Clares for the second time. She writes:

To the sorrow of parting was added the displeasure and condemnation of many All these were trifles, not to be felt in comparison with the interior suffering caused by the uncertainty of my vocation and of that which God willed with me I could believe that there is no suffering greater than the uncertainty as to the Divine will, to one who is resolved to seek above everything to serve God ...⁴

She went back to London, where she began to work with a group of friends, supporting the faith of Roman Catholic families and encouraging those who had fallen away to return. Very soon she travelled back to St Omer with these friends to begin a different sort of community, where they would live an unenclosed religious life, set up a school and begin other apostolic activities in the town, with some members working 'underground' in England. Thus began the search for a Rule of life that would enable them to be recognised in the Church as a religious Institute.

Mary was thoroughly convinced of her religious vocation from the first. This conviction was so strong that she was unable to imagine any other alternative, such as that chosen by St Louise de Marillac and St Vincent de Paul twenty years later for their new foundation of women who would help the poor in their own homes and in the streets of the cities. St Vincent was insistent that the Daughters of Charity were not religious, for fear that they would be forced into enclosure, and to this day the Daughters of Charity do not take perpetual vows and are listed as a Society of Apostolic Life, not a religious Institute.

Up until relatively recent times, the word *religious* was spelt with a capital 'R'. In Catholic Europe, with its rigid social classes and 'estates', the Church, including religious life, was indeed *the first estate*. The religious status was legally as well as ecclesiastically significant, giving protection through a specific civil and canonical identity. It was also

⁴ Ward, 'Italian Autobiography', 138.

significant in a religious sense, which we now might find difficult to understand since, over the history of religious life-experience in Europe, the Church had bestowed on religious Institutes and their members a plethora of indulgences, special rights and privileges to match their responsibilities and sacrifices. But many Church Councils had determined that to begin a religious community meant choosing an already approved rule of life. This was where Mary's problem lay.

She writes:

... great instance was made by diverse spirituall, and learned men, that we would take upon us some Rule already confirmed; severall rules were procured by our friends, both from Italy and France, and we earnestly urged to make choyce of some of them; they seemed not that which God would have done, and the refusall of them caused much persecution, and the more, because I denied all, and could not say what in perticuler I desired or found my self called unto.⁵

What then were all these different Rules which Mary was encouraged to choose, and why were they so unsuited to her purpose? From what we can read, Mary had knowledge of the following Rules,⁶ during her first years in St Omer:

1. the Rule of the Third Order of St Francis, a Rule for lay people, not religious, under which Mary lived under as an extern novice at the French Poor Clare monastery;
2. the Rule of St Clare, of the Colettine strict observance, which was the Rule of the choir sisters at St Omer, and also of the community Mary herself founded;
3. the Rule of St Benedict; and
4. the Rule of St Augustine.

She had been invited to consider entering these last two orders when she first arrived in St Omer, but she did not see them as strict enough for her.

On arriving at the Jesuit house in St Omer to ask advice about which convent to enter, Mary wrote:

At my first word, one of these said, that the Religious of St Clare of that town ... were expecting me The Father added that enclosed

⁵ Ward to Antonio Albergati, May/June 1621, 146.

⁶ All the Rules mentioned are available readily on the internet.

and unenclosed were the same order and had the same rule ... which I afterwards experienced to be the contrary I was at the same time invited to other orders, as those of St Benedict, St Augustine, etc. where I should have been received with all love, and as I myself wished, but these did not appear to me to be of such austerity as I sought.⁷

To these four well-known Rules we can add the reformed Rule of St Teresa, which at that time was quite a novelty outside Spain. On returning to St Omer after her stay in London, she wrote:

At that time I made a vow with the consent of my Confessor to be a religious, but not of any order in particular, not being able to incline towards one more than another, and finding in none of them anything which appealed to me. Then in obedience to my confessor without any inclination on my part, I made another vow to enter the Order of St Teresa should he so command me.⁸

As we know, it was what we call the 'glory vision' which released Mary from her worries about this vow:

... it was shown to me with clearness and inexpressible certainty that I was not to be of the Order of St Teresa, but that some other thing was determined for me, without all comparison more to the glory of God than my entrance into that holy religion.⁹

Let us look now at these various classic Rules, in an attempt to discover why there was nothing in them that appealed to Mary.

Third Order Franciscans

This was a Rule, not for religious, but for lay people, written by St Francis and approved by Pope Nicholas IV in 1289. It was designed as a way of life for people to follow Francis without entering a monastery. It remains the basis of the possibly hundreds of Franciscan congregations of sisters and brothers that exist around the world today, as well as of the Third Order Regular of priests (called TOR).

The components (twenty paragraphs), in the order in which they appear, are as follows:¹⁰

⁷ Ward, 'Italian Autobiography', 126.

⁸ Ward, 'Italian Autobiography', 138.

⁹ Ward, 'Italian Autobiography', 139.

¹⁰ See *Supra montem*, http://www.ecclesiamilitans.com/supra_montem.pdf, accessed 8 June 2012.

1. Before being given the habit, there must be a close examination of the candidate in knowledge of the faith, and obedience and loyalty to the Pope.
2. There must be a careful enquiry into the novice's life, including his or her possible debts, and an explanation of the duties. After one year, if seen worthy, the novice is professed, promising to keep the Divine precepts and make satisfaction for transgressions against the Rule. The commitment is lifelong.
3. The habit is of coarse cloth, unadorned.
4. Members should attend no 'vain amusements' such as plays or balls.
5. They should engage in abstinence and fasting, with the possibility of dispensations.
6. Eucharist is received three times a year.
7. No weapon is to be used for private purposes, only to defend the faith or the country.
8. Liturgy of the hours is to be said every day when possible.
9. The novice is to make a will.
10. Disputes are to be reconciled, if necessary with the help of the bishop.
11. The bishop or ministers have a right to intervene if a member's civil rights are infringed.
12. Oaths are not to be taken except where permitted legally.
13. Mass is to be heard daily and Solemn Mass each month. Alms should be given to poor members to help with the cost of burials.
14. Members should visit others who are sick and offer suffrages for the dead.
15. They should accept the duties of the Rule and fulfil offices. All offices are of fixed terms, not lifelong appointments.
16. A Franciscan priest is to be chosen as visitor, to impose penances for faults. Incurable members are warned three times then expelled.
17. Lawsuits are to be avoided.
18. Dispensations from the austerities of the Rule may be given by the bishop or the visitor.

19. Those incorrigible in their faults are to be excluded.
20. The Rule does not bind under sin.

As we can see, this Rule is simply a guide for lay people wishing to lead a regular, devout Christian life within the Franciscan family, as it were, with a minimum of supervision from the Franciscans and the local bishop. It allows for a wide variety of different styles of life—different groups added their own constitutions to the skeleton of the Rule, and many of them became religious communities, while others became more like sodalities or confraternities.

The Rule of St Clare

Reformed by St Colette, the Rule of St Clare was regarded as the most austere Rule for women commonly used in the Church in Mary Ward's time. The Rule was written by Clare herself, and approved on her deathbed by the Pope. It has twelve paragraphs.¹¹

Modelled on the Rule of St Francis, it begins with a definite purpose:

1. The form of life of the Order of the Poor Sisters that Blessed Francis established is this: to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity.

This might seem a very simple sentence, but for Francis and for Clare, of course, it was enormous, because they both took 'to observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ' quite literally.

2. The candidate is to be examined in faith and Christian knowledge, and checked for impediments such as ill health, advanced age or mental weakness. She should sell all her goods. She receives the habit but wears no veil during the year of probation. The way of life is carefully explained. One phrase about diversity and flexibility is interesting to students of the *Constitutions* of St Ignatius:

The Abbess should with discernment provide them with clothing according to the diversity of persons, places, seasons and cold climates, as it shall seem expedient to her by necessity.¹²

3. Divine office is said in choir; there is fasting every day (only one meal) except on Christmas day, confession twelve times each year and communion seven times a year.

¹¹ See www.stanthonyshrine.org/PoorClares/Rule_St_Clare.pdf.

¹² See *Constitutions* IX. 3. 8 [746], IV. 6. K [382].

4. The election of the Abbess is supervised by the Minister General of the Friars. The Abbess has an elected council of eight sisters. Chapter is held every week, where all sisters are consulted about the business of the monastery, 'for the Lord frequently reveals what is best to the least [among us]'.
5. There are strict regulations about silence, the grille and the parlour.
6. The sisters should not own possessions:

... by not having possession of property, except as much land as necessity requires for the integrity and proper seclusion of the monastery, and this land may not be cultivated except as a garden for the needs of the sisters.
7. They should work—domestic tasks are appointed 'to banish idleness'.
8. The community must not acquire property, but receive their daily needs by begging.
9. Penances are to be imposed on the sisters who sin. There is to be a mitigated Rule for those who serve outside the monastery—for example they may wear shoes.
10. The Abbess should be responsible for the admonition and correction of the sisters.
11. The custody of the enclosure should be maintained securely.
12. The visitor, the chaplain and his deputy, two lay brothers and a Cardinal Protector should be appointed.

The Rule of St Benedict

The details of this classic document are not necessary here. In brief, there are 73 paragraphs, of which the second is a long statement on the Abbot and his responsibilities as the leader of the community and what sort of person he should be.¹³ The contents of this Rule can be divided roughly into various topics:

- eleven paragraphs on the Abbot and the structures of the community and its practices;
- thirteen paragraphs on the way the divine office is to be said;

¹³ See <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule2/files/rule2.html>, accessed 8 June 2012.



- fourteen paragraphs on the different roles and jobs in the monastery;
- thirteen paragraphs on the daily life of the community, clothing, food, drink, etc.;
- seven paragraphs on the virtues to be practised by the monks;
- fourteen paragraphs on the discipline of the monastery, offences and corrections.

One significant section is chapter 4, which gives a long list of biblical commandments, precepts and virtues. Then it goes on:

Behold, these are the instruments of the spiritual art, which, if they have been applied without ceasing day and night and approved on judgment day, will merit for us from the Lord that reward which He hath promised But the workshop in which we perform all these works with diligence is the enclosure of the monastery, and stability in the community.

The Augustinian Rule

This Rule is the one chosen by St Dominic and many other religious communities, including the Sisters of Mercy. It was actually written in the eleventh century, based on the writings of St Augustine.¹⁴ It has

¹⁴ See <http://www.domcentral.org/trad/rule.htm>, accessed 8 June 2012.

thirteen paragraphs, mostly concerning the practices of community life, sharing of goods and union of minds and hearts. It begins:

First, that you dwell together in unity in the house and be of one mind and one heart in God, remembering that this is the end for which you are collected here.

It ends with a section on the role of the superior, part of which is quoted in canon 619 of the current *Code of Canon Law*:

He should give an example of good works to all. Let him correct the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, comfort the sick, be patient with all. Let him observe the rule with cheerfulness himself and cause others to observe it by the reverence he inspires. And though both are necessary, still it should rather be his desire to be loved than feared by you, ever mindful of the account he will have to give to God of your souls.

The Rule of Carmel, as Reformed by St Teresa

The Rule of Carmel originated in the thirteenth century as a Rule for the Latin hermits of Mount Carmel. Very soon it was adapted to a more communal European environment by the addition of some small changes. However, over the years, various popes and bishops mitigated the Rule considerably. Teresa, in her reform, went back to the original Rule, with its emphasis on solitude and contemplation.¹⁵

It has eighteen paragraphs, beginning with the election of the Prior and the profession of the monks. The other paragraphs cover the provisions of the monastery for the main goal of solitude and silence:

Each one of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers unless attending to some other duty.

Liturgical prayer, meals and Eucharist were held in common, and there were rules for fasting, abstinence, work, fraternal correction and the virtues necessary for this way of life. It ends with an epilogue:

Here then are the few points I have written down to provide you with a standard of conduct to live up to; but our Lord, at his second

¹⁵ See <http://www.ocarm.org/books/content/rule-carmel>, accessed 8 June 2012.

coming, will reward anyone who does more than he is obliged to do. See that the bounds of common sense are not exceeded, however, for common sense is the guide of the virtues.

Comparison of the Rules

It is interesting to compare these classic rules of life, which were and still are so revered in the Church. Speaking very generally, we can say that St Clare's Rule emphasizes the imitation of Jesus in simplicity and extreme poverty. St Benedict's Rule emphasizes the liturgical rhythm and balance of a structured Christian community life, with emphasis on the virtue of humility. St Augustine can be seen to focus on relationships, communion of minds and hearts. The Rule of Carmel emphasizes solitude and prayer. (I exclude the Rule of the Third Order Franciscans, which was not under Mary's consideration since it was not a Rule for a religious community in the strict sense.)

All are filled with the wisdom of experience, sober but passionate about the one thing necessary. Each, in its own way, is a work of Christian genius. Surely Mary Ward was not speaking literally when she said that she found nothing that appealed to her in any of them. On the other hand, because of Mary's finely tuned sensitivity to the will of God for her, we can sympathize with her when she says that they 'seemed not that which God would have done ...'.

Speaking very generally, without any claim to in-depth study of the texts and their history, we can see that, with more or less emphasis, all define a lifestyle based on a stable domestic locus, a community living together and praying together in imitation of the models in the New Testament, whether it be the apostolic group gathered around Jesus or the community described in Acts. While all, of course, profess loyalty to the Pope, the local bishop is the significant figure representing the Church. None refer to active apostolic ministry. In the case of the Augustinian Rule, the only one of these Rules written specifically for priests, it seems that priestly ministry is presumed, but the Rule does not address it. The obligation to work refers to domestic duties within the monastery and is justified only as a defence against the vice of idleness. Detailed description of the clothing is often included, signifying social equality as well as poverty. There is a strong sense of separation from the evils of the world. In the case of the only Rule written specifically for women, this separation becomes like that of a fortress, with detailed prescriptions about the duties of the porter and the various ways in which the door of the monastery must be locked.

The Formula of the Institute of the Society of Jesus

Now we come to the *Formula of the Institute* of the Society of Jesus. Although it is written in Ignatius' typically wordy style, this is a relatively simple document of four paragraphs, surrounded by six others giving it the format of a papal document. The actual Plan for the Institute is found in paragraphs 3–6:

Paragraph 3 begins with the familiar words:

Whoever desires to serve as a soldier of God beneath the banner of the cross in our Society ... should keep what follows in mind. He is a member of a Society founded chiefly for this purpose: to strive for the defense and propagation of the faith and the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine ... by means of public preaching, lectures, and any other ministration whatsoever of the word of God, and further by means of the Spiritual Exercises, the education of children and unlettered persons in Christianity, and the spiritual consolation of Christ's faithful ... in reconciling the estranged, in holily assisting and serving those who are found in prisons or hospitals ... according to what will seem expedient for the glory of God and the common good.

Ministry is to be done free of charge. The members belong to different grades and have different occupations. The government is defined with reference to the Superior General and council, *Constitutions*, and infrequent gatherings of all the members.

Paragraph 4 concerns the Fourth Vow of obedience to the Pope in relation to mission and obedience to the General of the society. Paragraph 5 concerns the poverty of the Society, which is to have no fixed revenues except in the case of the colleges for scholastics. Paragraph 6 contains provision for daily life:

- Priests retain the obligation to say the office, but in private.
- There is no distinctive habit.
- Clothing, food, etc., are to be the same as those of reputable priests.
- A careful, 'long and exacting' testing should be undertaken before admission.
- Coadjutors should take simple vows.

Here we have a completely different picture from the other Rules, despite some common elements. The focus of the Ignatian formula is on

action outside the community house—in the public square, in the vineyard of the Lord, in the international Church—with hardly a mention of community life or the local superior as such. In fact, the personal life of the members is dismissed in a short phrase: it is to be what is normal for reputable priests. There are no prescribed austerities or penances. The purpose of the Society, ‘to strive for the defense and propagation of the faith and the progress of souls in the Christian life and doctrine’, is not at all prominent in the other Rules, which focus much more on a response to a call to live the Christian life in a particular and intense way in order to save one’s own soul.

Mary Ward's Decision to ‘Take the Same’

Comparing these Rules, it would be easy to conclude that the *Formula* of the Society of Jesus, with its emphasis on apostolic action, was much more suited to Mary’s purpose than any of the others. Why then did she find the choice so difficult? The reason would have been obvious in Mary’s time—even excluding the areas specifically related to the sacrament of Orders, almost everything in this Rule was forbidden to women. She had an intense need to be sure that she was responding to God’s will, since it seemed to be leading her in a direction excluded by

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‘She perceived quite plainly by an interior voice in what way she was to organise her Institute’, from the Painted Life of Mary Ward

the Church. In the documentation there appear to be two different strands to her discernment.

In the first picture, we can imagine that Mary, remembering her bad experiences with the Poor Clares and having lost all confidence in her ability to use her own common sense about the choice of a Rule, waited in agony until she had a definite sign from God to direct her. In this scenario, Mary's discernment is a bit like that of the prophet Samuel, narrated in 1 Samuel 16, when all the sons of Jesse appeared before him, one by one, but none of them was even considered as the new king of Israel. When the last one, David, finally appeared, the Lord said to Samuel, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one' (1 Samuel 16:12).

The other scenario can be traced through Mary's writings, where we can see hints of a struggle, right from the beginning, between her understanding of her call to a religious life of austerity and prayer, and her desire to do good for others, not just for herself. These small indications of a conflict between what she saw as two mutually incompatible life goals are obscure, but they are certainly present and recurring in her writings.¹⁶ So we could hypothesize that Mary, faced with a plethora of different Rules, did in fact look at them all carefully, to see if she could find some way in which these two aspects of contemplative dedication to the things of God and active apostolic work for her neighbour could be reconciled. We could perhaps liken this exercise to the discernment of the prophet Ezekiel described in 1 Kings 19, where the poor prophet, depressed and afraid for his life, surrounded by Israelites who had rejected the covenant, climbed up the holy mountain and stood there waiting to meet God. Ezekiel had to experience the wind, the earthquake and the fire to discern if God was in them, before finally finding God in the gentle breeze. Although we could hardly describe the *Constitutions* of St Ignatius as a gentle breeze, we can see that they certainly had that effect on Mary Ward, putting an end immediately to her years of anguished searching.

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¹⁶ See particularly Mary Ward's letter to Nuncio Antonio Albergati.