MARY WARD'S APOSTOLIC VOCATION

By IMMOLATA WETTER

THE RENEWAL inaugurated by the council of Trent made no provision for the participation of women in the direct mission of the Church. Many dedicated women were, however, inspired to take up various charitable works, which included those which advanced the 'good of souls'. Of course there have always been activities in the Church which required the services of women other than ordinary domestic chores: nursing, looking after children, the education of girls and the religious instruction of women. Traditionally, there has been little opposition to religious women undertaking the care of the sick. Their activity in other spheres has tended to engender fears of irregularity in matters of morals and doctrine, particularly those tasks connected with the preaching of the word. Mary Ward has frequently been described as the woman who prepared the way for a form of religious Institute which combined commitment to God in the three vows of religion, with the exercise of the direct apostolate. It would not, however, be correct to claim that this great englishwoman was the only one of her time who attempted to introduce a way of life which hitherto had not been canonically recognized. During the latter part of the seventeenth century, women in a number of european countries attempted to combine a total and lifelong commitment to God with an active apostolate. Though Mary Ward had a special part to play in this movement, she was not the only one involved.

Let us recall some of her contemporaries. Whilst founders of religious orders in Mary Ward's time almost exclusively saw enclosure as a hindrance for a fruitful apostolate, St Jeanne de l'Estonnac freely chose enclosure for her 'Compagnie de Marie'; yet she had no intention of sealing off her sisters from contact with the world. Her programme included not only teaching and various kinds of help for the churches within striking distance of her religious houses, but also similar works of charity. It was not only pupils who came into the convents of St Jeanne, but housewives and widows seeking advice and instruction. The sisters liked to make contact with the

families of their pupils. The boarders were also separated from the members of the community, as Jeanne did not want the children to have to live like little nuns'.[1] She said at the age of seventy-three, when she heard that the ursuline sister, the venerable Mary of the Incarnation, had gone to Canada, 'If I were not an old woman, I would myself establish a house of our order in New France . . . I would go among the pagan people . . . to work for their conversion'.[2]

The spanish noblewoman, Luisa de Carvajal, showed an astonishing initiative which unfortunately came to nothing after a few years because of unfavourable circumstances. She went to London to help the oppressed english catholics. Her plan was to found an Institute of 'the Sovereign Virgin Mary our Lady', whose members would make, in addition to the three religious vows, a special vow of obedience to the Pope – like the jesuits.[3] But her plans ended with her death in London at the age of 48.

Of the great ursuline movement of the 16th and 17th centuries we shall refer only to Anne de Xainctonge, to whom the ursulines in Burgundy owe their foundation. In common with other women of her time who founded religious Institutes, Anne had not the slightest doubt that she ought to dedicate her life to God by way of the vows. The problem facing her was how to combine apostolic mission with the rule of enclosure, then universally imposed on women religious. If she did not submit to it, she could not hope for canonical recognition of her Institute as a religious order. This lack of ecclesiastical approval made many young women hesitate to enter the new Institute. But as Anne explained on one occasion to the young sisters:

> A name neither increases nor diminishes the perfection of a state of life. The titles conferred on religious men or women do not confer any special grace on the people who receive them. We must not have any regrets about being deprived of a certain reputation among men. If our vows, in comparison to solemn vows, made us less like Jesus Christ, I would urge you to change, and I would do the same myself. Do not taken in by mere appearances. You must have the highest esteem for

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[1] Cf *Historia de la Orden de la Compañia de Maria Neustra Señora*, (trad. del frances por M. Cerero Blanco, O.D.N., San Sebastian, 1964), tom. I, p 169; I. de Azcarate Ristori, O.D.N., *El origen de las Ordenes Femeninas de Enseñanza y la Compañia de Maria* (San Sebastian, 1964), pp 163–171; P. Hoesl, *Sainte Jeanne de Lestonnac* (Paris 1949), p 115.

[2] Quoted from L. Brou, S.I., *La Compagnie de Marie Notre-Dame* (Paris, 1926), p 88.

[3] Cf L. de Carvajal, *Escritos autobiográficos*, (ed C. M. Abad, S.I., Barcelona, 1966), p 321.

> the great religious orders; but relinquish any ambitious desire either for their name or their privileges. It is our privilege to sacrifice all our glory for the love of our good Master, and without any fuss; this is the example he gave us for the thirty years of his hidden life.[4]

For this burgundian foundress, the apostolate was at stake. She repeatedly asked the fathers of the Society of Jesus for help, because she had adopted the plan of Ignatius for her Institute, at least in so far as it seemed to serve her ends. 'As a daughter of the Society of Jesus, in so far as it is possible, I hope that a priest of that Society will not refuse me his advice and help for the success of my undertaking'.[6]

Through the difficulties which Anne de Xaintconge had to overcome in fulfilling her task, she reached a deeper understanding of the suitability of women for apostolic mission. Her own words show how closely related her struggle was to that of Mary Ward:

> Our condition as women, as well as our defects, prevent us doing the work in the way that men do . . . It is forbidden us to aspire to their achievement, and we do not even think of it. But we have talents and capabilities as women, and it is not forbidden us to use them to draw those of our own sex to religious life and to teach them what they are able for . . . We might not carry great flaming torches which cast the brilliant light of day on the Church; but we shall carry little lanterns instead, which will light up the hearts of young girls, servant-maids, poor people and women. The little daylight we can let in will be provided by our lives and the energies we give to our teaching, whose object is to make our God known and adored through his divine Son, our Lord.[6]

We could refer to other contemporaries of Mary Ward who attempted to make their lives fruitful in complete dedication to God in the direct apostolate. They all needed the active support of the Church. Rome's view at that time was that there must be no relaxation of the strict rules of enclosure for women religious; so that the development of their apostolic vocation was arrested. Such a development could in fact have been a great blessing for Europe and the missionary territorities. Charisms which should have served the Church were suppressed and forced out of their true shape. Some foundations became subject to the restrictions of full enclosure; others came under the active protection of bishops, so that they

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[4] Quoted from J. Morey, *Anne de Xainctonge* (Paris/Besançon, 1892), pp 30–31.
[5] *Ibid.*, p 108. [6] *Ibid.*, p 296.

never expanded beyond the boundaries of individual dioceses; others again had to live through times of anguished uncertainty before they finally achieved papal recognition. There were also communities which were unable to devote themselves for years to the work for which they had been founded owing to long-drawn-out disputes over jurisdiction and similar canonical problems.[7]

In the case of Mary Ward's foundation, a long period of anonymous existence was necessary before difficulties in the way of ecclesiastical recognition were dispelled. But this time was filled with useful activity in the education and training of young women in the individual dioceses, and then also in missionary territories. Her Institute was eventually approved in 1877, under Pius IX.

A consideration of these women of the seventeenth century, the vicissitudes of their lives and their persistent faithfulness to the Church, strengthens our trust in divine providence: that so many women should have received a specific call to religious life at virtually the same time and to aspects of the Church's apostolate which were totally neglected. One can also see how their apostolate was constantly frustrated, if not from ill-will, then at least through a lack of appreciation and understanding. The experience of Mary Ward is an outstanding example of this frustration. Among contemporary foundresses, she was the only one to present her case personally to the Pope. Failure was hers from first to last; but it may not have been entirely fruitless.

In what follows we hope to show how Mary Ward prepared herself for her apostolate and exercised it, the nature of her charism and the plans she conceived; and how, finally, her hope and trust in God survived the failure of her work.

Early vocation

Mary Ward grew up in Yorkshire. The first third of her life was spent among the catholic nobility of her homeland. From the age of sixteen until her departure from England, from the end of 1600 to the beginning of 1606, she stayed with the Babthorpes of Osgodby in the East Riding. There she received God's call to the religious life. Stories which were told her by the old servant, Margaret Garrett, helped her vocation to surface in her consciousness 'in a

[7] For example, the problems of jurisdiction which bedevilled the first Ursulines and Hospitalières in Canada. Cf L. Campeau, 'Les initiatives de la S. Congregation en faveur de la Nouvelle-France', in *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum* (ed. J. Metzler, O.M.I., Rome/Freiburg/Wien, 1972) Vol. I/2, pp 764–782.

moment'. She understood it in the sense in which she had heard it from Margaret: that she should enter a convent. The accounts she had heard from her maid also formed her ideas about convent life, which she set down in her notes: 'He gave me at that instant a great desire never to love any but him'; she 'immediately conceived a singular love and esteem for religious life, as a sanctuary where all might and must be holy'; her vocation seemed to her to be 'the best way to serve him'.[8] Love, sanctity, service: this was the plan of the 'convent' Mary was looking for. It was a concept whose length, breadth and height was later to be substantiated.

She realized that she was on the right lines from 'the little satisfaction I could take in any worldly contentment'. She saw how 'insecure, uncertain and short' was all human happiness. So she understood that her vocation was a gift from God. She thanked him for this 'disposition of mind'. 'God gave me first a feeling affection to it'. Looking back to the time of her first calling after just two decades, she was filled with thanksgiving:

> Thou tookest me into thy care, and by degrees ledd me from all els, that at length I might see, and settle my love on thee. What had I ever done to please thee? Or what was there in me wherewith to serve thee? . . . O happy begun freedom, the beginning of all my good, and more worth me at that time than the whole world besides.[9]

In the joy of her first enthusiasm, she gradually over-loaded herself with devotional practices; what had previously seemed easy for her became difficult and burdensome. She became a prey to scruples; but she hesitated to speak with others about this inner crisis, the cause of much suffering, particularly as her nature was ill-suited to such a narrow conception of the interior life.

Her release from this inner anxiety and agitation she ascribed to God's mercy. He gave her the courage to say to herself: 'These things are not of obligation but of devotion; and God is not pleased with certain acts made thus by constraint, and to acquire one's own quiet; therefore I will either do these things with love and freedom, or leave them alone'. And so she found peace again. She says that the experience helped her later in similar situations.

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[8] Autobiographical Notes in English of Mary Ward, cited in M. C. E. Chambers, I.B.M.V., *The Life of Mary Ward* (ed. H. J. Coleridge, S.J., London, 1882), Vol I, pp 46–47.

[9] From MS copy of the Autobiographical Notes, preserved in the Archives of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Rome.

Her first response to God's calling involved separation from her native land. She found universal opposition to her plans: from her family, her confessor, her friends and acquaintances. They urged objections: her health would not be adequate for the rigours of convent life; she would soon be sent home. Mary sought help from God in prayer. In her affliction, the words of Christ came into her mind: *Quaerite primum Regnum Dei*, 'seek first the kingdom of God'. Immediately she was freed from her tension and anxiety. She felt that God would stand by her. 'I had, as one may say, a certainty that if I did my part in embracing the better portion, and preferring before all the honour and service of God, his divine goodness would supply for every deficiency of mine'.[10] The same text also helped her later in apparently hopeless situations. Further help from God removed the opposition of friends and relations. On the 8th January 1624 in Rome, Mary Ward described several graces which she had received in her earlier life. Under the heading 'What by our blessed Saviour', can be found the words 'The spillinge of the challish'.[11] The old biographies and a copy of the *Painted Life* explain the meaning of this brief reference. In the spring of 1606, Mary Ward was staying in London. Her confessor, probably Father Richard Holtby, S.J., had the misfortune after the consecration at Mass to overturn the chalice. From that moment the priest no longer dared to oppose Mary's plans, out of anxiety that he might spill another chalice. Mary's friends and relatives also gave up their opposition to her plans.

She left England in 1606, after Pentecost, at the age of twenty-one. At this time a deep inner darkness overcame her. Up to the present she had acknowledged a call to community life in general. Now she had to face the question, 'Which community?' She did not feel drawn to any particular one; she decided to choose the strictest. In 1620 she recounted the story of her calling to the papal nuncio at Cologne, Albergati. From her words it is possible to guess how far she had to travel before she found her own authentic vocation.

> I had no particular vocation to one Order more than another; only it seemed to me most perfection to take the most austere, that so a soul might give herself to God, not in part but altogether, since I saw not how a religious woman could do good to more than herself alone. To teach children then seemed too much distraction, might be done

[10] Autobiographical Notes in Italian, quoted in Chambers, Vol I, pp 55, 69.

[11] Autograph Note of Mary Ward, no. 1, in the Archives of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Munich.

> by others, nor was of that perfection and importance as therefore to hinder that great quiet and continual communication with God, which strict enclosure afforded. Which enclosure and the perfect observance of poverty were the two especial points I aimed at in whatsoever Order I should undertake, being (as I said) I could do no good to others.[12]

When Mary Ward entered the Poor Clares, she still lacked direction to an active apostolate, although she had learnt and experienced in England the amount of good women were in a position to do for the maintenance of the faith. Her natural inclination towards withdrawal, loneliness and silent prayer must have become stronger in Osgodby. In the three years 1606 to 1609 she was led along a path which she had been unwilling to travel in the first enthusiasm of her calling. What happened during this time? The crisis took the form of suffering and disillusionment: she experienced dryness, inner emptiness, a feeling that the object of so many years of searching had slipped from her grasp. Her attentiveness of mind and heart to God, her firm determination to do what he wanted of her: these two together were the means of opening her whole self to the Spirit. She began to have experiences of God. Grace became efficacious in her.

Originally Mary had believed that women religious could only do good for themselves. It was whilst she was preparing to found a convent of Poor Clares for englishwomen that she had her first insight into the active apostolate. She was convinced beyond all doubt that God wanted this convent to be founded; that in this way she would be doing a service to the catholics of her country. Here she also hoped to find her own niche: a place where she could live a life of complete devotion. But even in her own foundation she found no resting place. On May 2nd 1609, Mary the novice felt and saw inwardly, strongly and clearly that she was not to spend her life in the beloved enclosure of a convent of Poor Clares. She wrote about this spiritual experience to Nuncio Albergati:

> Sitting at work . . . came suddenly upon me such an alteration and disposition, as the operation of an inexpressible power could only cause, with a sight and certainty that there I was not to remain, that some other thing was to be done by me, but what in particular was not shown.[13]

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[12] The letter is quoted in full by J. Leitner, *Geschichte der englischen Fräulein und ihrer Institute* (Regensburg, 1869), p. 736. Cf also Chambers, Vol I, p 208, where only part of the letter is cited.

[13] Leitner, *loc. cit.* p 738.

After some months of further trials, she left the noviciate, in obedience to this prompting, in September 1609.

Beginnings of the apostolate

What was she to do now? To leave the convent she had herself founded was the greatest possible wrench. And when the news of her departure was spread abroad, those who had previously praised her, now abused her. Yet these sufferings 'were trifles, not to be felt in comparison with the interior anguish caused by the uncertainty of my vocation and of that which God willed with me'. Here Mary Ward appears to make some sort of distinction between her 'vocation' and her work. By 'vocation' she understood the consecration of her life to God under vow. Since, however, she knew neither the work to be done nor the conditions of life to be associated with it, in which this vocation was to find expression, she found herself in a state of uncertainty. The years that followed were characterized by her humble search for God's will. Mary never complained about the tediousness of this three years' 'detour', as one might humanly describe this testing-time of her vocation in Poor Clare convents. Her strong trust in God enabled her to find it a time of learning for her future work. Here she was introduced to that practice of prayer which was essential to her life; and she became acquainted with the ascesis and way of life in an ancient religious order. Thus though these two long periods of withdrawal with the french and english Poor Clares contained many painful experiences, they were an intensive preparation for the mission which lay ahead of her.

In order to be sure of responding to God's call during this time of uncertainty, with the agreement of her jesuit confessor, Roger Lee, Mary made a vow to become a religious, and promised (this was not her own wish, but that of her confessor) to become a carmelite if he should order her to do so. She then returned to England for a few months. Of this period she notes in her autobiography: 'I did not spend that time ill, nor did I neglect to do as much as possible for the cause I went over to serve'.[14] She spoke in similar terms to the Nuncio Albergati: 'I made a third vow, to spend some time in England to do all the little I could for God, and the good of those there, not to be idle in the meantime, and the better prepared for whatsoever God should call me to'.[15]

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[14] Autobiographical Notes, cited in Chambers, Vol I, pp 192, 227.
[15] Letter to Albergati, Leitner, *loc. cit.*, p 740.

In London, towards the end of 1609, she received 'a second infused light', as she calls it in the italian autobiography. She understood that she was not being called to the carmelite life, but 'that some other thing was determined for me without all comparison more to the glory of God than to my entrance into that holy religion'.[16] However, she was not shown what it was she had to do. For a long time she heard the words resounding, 'Glory, glory, glory', and found in her heart a great love for what had been prepared for her; and she now knew this, that her task would abound to God's glory. But when she remembered her vow to become a carmelite if her confessor should so command, she fell once more into uncertainty. She prayed and did penance as a sign that she sought only the will of God.

During this stay in England, Mary was able to do much good. She was engaged in a dangerous work of apostolate. Four pictures in the *Painted Life* (Nos 17–20), with ten illustrations in all, show her in conversation with the sick and with priests whom she summoned to minister to the them. We see her in the dress of a maid-servant, a disguise which enabled her to go about on errands of mercy unrecognized. She is depicted refusing presents offered to her; it was by prayer and penance that she was to test and to preserve the integrity of her mind and heart. What she has to say about this ministry for english catholics reveals the extent to which her spirit was responding to the call of an active apostolate. At the end of her description of this period in England, she writes: 'Such labour is only too honourable, but nevertheless painful enough, if not undertaken for him to whom we owe all, and through the help of whose grace alone it is fitly and perseveringly feasible'.[17]

On her return to Saint-Omer at the end of 1609 or the beginning of 1610, she was joined by several english noblewomen who had decided to adopt the same way of life to which Mary was turning. Catholic families in England began to entrust their daughters for education and training to this 'english Lady'.[18] This was her first active work. However, as the leader of this small group, she had to face the question, what rule should be followed by the small community which had taken up residence in the Rue Grosse (now the

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16 Autobiographical Notes, cited in Chambers, Vol I, p 227.

17 *Ibid.*, Chambers, Vol I, p 228.

18 The name 'English Ladies' was given to them early on at St Omer. Up to the present time it has remained a popular title in most european countries; but was never adopted in the official title of the Institute.

Rue Carnot). The constitutions of various religious orders were suggested to her. She found none of them acceptable; but at the time she was unable to explain what she really wanted. This continuing uncertainty 'caused infinite troubles . . . extreme troubles';[19] the consolations afforded by the promising beginnings began to fade. As the foundress was still unclear about the nature of her future work, she and her companions led a hard and penitential life, spending much time in prayer to God that he would give them a clear indication of the next step to be taken. Though the preparatory period was long, the experience of these years of search was of great benefit to her foundation.

Mary Ward's charism

After about two years, their prayers and sacrifice were rewarded. Towards the end of 1611, whilst she was recovering from a severe illness, Mary received a clear indication of the way which she and her sisters were to follow. The foundress has left us two personal accounts of what was perhaps her strongest inner experience; they were written down eight or nine years after the event.

She speaks more generally in a letter to the Nuncio at Cologne:

> About this time, in the year 1611, I fell sick in great extremity. Being somewhat recovered, (by a vow made to send in pilgrimage to our Blessed Lady of Sichem), being alone in some extraordinary repose of mind, I heard distinctly, not by sound of voice but intellectually understood, these words: 'Take the same of the Society'. So understood as that we were to take the same both in matter and manner, that only excepted, which God by diversity of sex hath prohibited. These few words gave so great measure of light in that particular Institute, comfort and strength, and changed so the whole soul, as that impossible for me to doubt, but that they came from him whose words are works.[20]

In her letter to the jesuit John Tomson, (*alias* Gerard) she reproduced the three sentences of the instruction she had received at the time: '(understood as it is writ, without adding, or altering one syllabe) Take the same of the Society. Father General will never permitt it. Go to him'. Here, too, she emphasizes the impression which she received on hearing these words:

> These are the words, whose worth cannot be valued, nor the good they contain too dearly bought: these gave sight where there was

[19] Letter to Albergati, Leitner, loc. cit. pp 742, 743.
[20] Cited in Chambers, Vol I, p 283.

> none, made known what God would have done, gave strength to suffer what since hath happened, assurance of what is wished for in time to come. And if ever I be worthy to do anything more about the Institute, hither I must come to draw.[21]

The essence of the message lies in the sentence; 'Take the same of the Society'. There is no doubt that the words, 'the same', refer to the rules and way of life laid down by St Ignatius in the constitutions of the Society of Jesus. She and her companions were now to follow a way of life previously restricted to male religious. The implications of this instruction might seem at first sight to be the abandonment of Mary's own felt desire: to live the strict contemplative life, in complete withdrawal from the world and in absolute poverty. But there was more in the vocation of Mary Ward than this.

Her calling, as she conceived it in 1606, was limited by her situation and by the incomplete character of her spiritual development. It would seem to have been her loving desire to follow God's call to the utmost human limit. She felt obliged to choose a way which would preclude an escape into any form of self-love; so she felt herself compelled to seek the most austere form of life open to her. She also felt the need to find again the peace which she had enjoyed at Osgodby: she realized how much life there had contributed to her spiritual growth. There were, doubtless, other contributory factors: her complete lack of experience of the religious life, the absence of regular spiritual direction, and the general sense of helplessness which would be bound to afflict a young woman living in a foreign country without a sufficient command of the language. All these were 'transitional' elements in the growth of her authentic vocation. She was now able to turn to those very activities which she had previously felt to be 'distractions'. She realized now that she was being called from her isolation; and she responded.

This response was a further development in the spiritual process which had begun in her native England. In theory, the new inner instructions she had received were given their shape by the example of the english missionaries, particularly of the jesuits. Nor must we forget the inspiration and heroic example of the english catholics. Mary certainly never forgot those brave men and women of Yorkshire, who prized their faith 'above rubies', and were prepared to sacrifice their personal security and freedom and even their lives

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[21] Letter to F. Tomson, cited in Chambers, Vol I, p 453.

to defend it. So Mary returned to the work she had begun and learnt so well in England.

The task summoned up all the initiative and strength of which she was capable. The 1611 text of the instruction makes it clear that she was already facing difficulties. The jesuits were certainly reporting in various ways the endeavours of those women of Europe who sought to fashion their lives on the ignatian pattern and to found religious Institutes based on the principles of his Society. However, it was axiomatic at that time that no Institute of religious women should be allowed to form itself totally on the jesuit constitutions. And yet, in view of her revelation of 1611, Mary Ward could not be satisfied with any pale imitation of the ignatian heritage. Her foundation would demand more than a few principles of jesuit spirituality applied to women. She wanted 'the same of the Society . . . both in matter and manner', as far as this was possible for women. In the 'instruction' of 1611, she had certainly been told that the Father General would never allow this; and yet she had a clear direction to go to him. From 1611 onwards, it would be borne in upon her gradually that the mission which she had received would extend beyond the confines of her own life-span; and, as in the case of her previous instructions and illuminations, there was a mixture of light and darkness. It brought her to practise complete obedience in the matter of her calling, and to bear and overcome opposition and adversity with patience and trust.

In the beginning, the text of the ignatian *Constitutions* and its detailed prescriptions were not available to her. There was, however, preparatory work to be done. Her first and most outstanding task was to introduce the community to the form of life expounded by Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises, which were never meant to be restricted to the male sex. These Exercises formed, as they still do, the foundation of the spiritual structure of her Constitutions.

It is not surprising, then, that it was precisely through making the Spiritual Exercises (in October 1615) that Mary attained a clear vision of the dispositions required of those who felt themselves called to become members of her Institute. She saw how her sisters could find happiness in this vocation. In a letter of November 1st 1615, she explains to her confessor, Fr Lee, what had happened:

> It seems a certain clear and perfect estate, to be had in this life, and such an one as is altogether needful for those that should well discharge the duties of this Institute. I never read of anie I can compare in likeness to it. It is not like the state of saints, whose holiness chiefly

> appears in that union with God, which maketh them out of themselves; I perceived then an apparent difference, and yet feel myself drawn to love and desire this estate more than all those favours. The felicity of this course (for as much as I can express) was a singular freedom from all that could make one adhere to earthly things, with an entire application and apt disposition to all good works. Something happened also discovering the freedom that such a soul should have had to refer all to God.[22]

These words reveal the apostolic character of Mary Ward's life which she also desired for her Sisters. They emphasized a different ideal from those to which the convent of her day aspired. When she speaks of the 'state of Saints' this doubtless means a kind of spirituality which depends on being lifted above the realities of ordinary life and which often overemphasized 'special' spiritual states. Mary's aim was directed to helping her neighbour. This task required people possessed of an inner freedom. For this reason, the idea of freedom played a very important part in her spiritual programme, freedom from all inordinate love and envy – one which implied an availability for every good work which needed to be done.

How can we describe Mary's charism? It is the gift which God offered her in those hours of spiritual enlightenment, in particular those experiences of 1609, 1611 and 1615, and which she accepted so as to give them a chance to bear fruit. During those years when she was being particularly guided by God, it became clear to her that the work of her Institute was to serve God in the Church. Though she never enters into any lengthy discussion on the subject, her writings constantly reveal her concern for the Church during the troubled times of the seventeenth century. She hoped that the effect of her Institute would be to the greater glory of God and the good of the Church, 'for which we freely spend our lives and labours even to the shedding of our blood'.[23] It meant suffering and pain for a 'true catholic and most obedient daughter of holy Church',[24] as she once called herself to the Pope, when she reflected 'how greatly the heresy, the vanity and the immorality of her age affected almost every corner of the world'.[25] It is a measure of their courage that this woman and her companions chose to oppose themselves to these

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[22] Letter to Fr Lee, cited in Chambers, Vol I, pp 346–347.

[23] From the latin manuscript, *Rationes de subordinatione*, preserved in Arch. Gén. du Royaume, Bruxelles, Arch. Jesuitiques, Prov. Gallo-belg., carton 32.

[24] Letter of Mary Ward to Urban VIII (Arch. I.B.M.V. Munich, NS 82).

[25] *Brevis Declaratio* (1619); (copy in the Arch. I.B.M.V., Rome).

tendencies. But Mary also knew that charismatic vocation alone was not sufficient; her work would need the official recognition of the hierarchical Church.

THE POLICY OF THE INSTITUTE

It was Mary Ward's intention that the directives and experiences, which were the fruit of her prayer with regard to her Institute, should be tested in a period of experimentation in the actual life of the young congregation; and that the results of the experiments should then acquire the force of law by papal approbation and confirmation. First of all she drew up a fairly comprehensive plan, the *Ratio Instituti*, which was brought to Rome at the end of 1615 by the english nobleman, Sir Thomas Sackville, with a view to its confirmation by Pope Paul V. A further draft for the Institute was worked out in the years 1620–21. (The only extant manuscript, in the Vatican library, bears the title '*Institutum*'.) Whilst the *Ratio Instituti* is, by and large, the work of the Foundress herself, a great deal of the *Institutum*, the draft of 1620–21, is drawn from the *Formula Instituti* of the Society of Jesus, reproduced in the papal bull *Exposcit debitum* of 1550. In this text, she keeps as closely as possible to the commission she had received in 1611. However, there are no fundamental differences between *Institutum* and the earlier *Ratio*; except that, in the draft of 1620–1621, the structures of the ignatian *Constitutions* are more clearly visible, and the more feminine formulation of 1615 is less strongly emphasized.

Here we shall consider only those parts of the *Institutum* which have reference to the apostolic service of women: first with regard to the aim and the object of the Institute, secondly with regard to its works and the structures necessary for carrying them out.

The end of the Institute

In the *Ratio Instituti* Mary Ward gives a fairly comprehensive exposition on the end of her Institute and the twofold aspect of this aim. First she stresses personal sanctification, understood as a liberation from the shackles of self-will and self-love, and as a positive source of virtue:

> Virtue, indeed, we would have so highly valued in all those who would embrace our manner of life, that anyone wanting in it is to be judged unfit for our state of life, no matter what may be her other talents and endowments ... In the second place, to devote ourselves with all diligence and zeal to promote or procure the salvation

> of our neighbour, by means of the education of girls, or by any other means that will be congruous to the times, or in which it will be judged that we can by our labours promote the greater glory of God and, in any place, further the propagation of our Holy Mother, the Catholic Church.[26]

This stress on the twofold aspect of the Institute's purpose is absent from the *Institutum;* the emphasis here is on apostolic service, and the document simply takes it for granted that the members are obliged to strive for personal sanctity. The immense work which the Institute faces in pursuit of its goals is clearly implied in the descriptive sentence at the beginning of the formula:

> Whoever wishes to serve beneath the banner of the cross as a soldier of God in our Society, which we desire to be designated by the name of Jesus, and to serve the Lord alone and His bride the Church, under the Roman Pontiff, the Vicar of Christ on earth . . .[27]

Those entering the Society commit themselves to the service of God in the Church and for it. This service under the banner of the Cross will involve struggle and suffering. Mary Ward did not hesitate to adopt Ignatius's image of the fighting man: *sub crucis vexillo Deo militare.*[28]

Apostolic works

In her *Ratio Instituti* the foundress had already briefly outlined the principal tasks of the Order in setting out its goals. She does, however, go into detail about certain particular works. From the very first, she emphasizes, those who enter the Institute must realize that they are not called to the solitary life, 'but rather for the sake of divine love alone, they are to prepare themselves to undertake any labour whatsoever in the education and instruction of maidens and girls'; these young women are to be instructed in their duties to God, prepared for the reception of the sacraments and be introduced to a christian way of life, with the assistance of personal example and intercessory prayer.

At the end of this section, the writer briefly summarizes the extent of the work and is careful not to exclude any 'work of love and humility'. For her, the emphasis is on the active power of the apostol-

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[26] Translation of the *Ratio Instituti,* in Chambers, Vol I, pp 376–377.

[27] Latin manuscript *Institutum,* Bibl. Vat. Capp. 47, ff. 56v–62r.

[28] *Sub vexillo crucis* is from the christian literature which St Ignatius read during his convalescence; *Deo militare* recalls 2 Tim 2, 4.

ate, the greater glory of God, and obedience, which, like Ignatius, she sees in its two-fold function, as a work of sacrifice and as a means to more intensive effort. By obedience the way is opened for the initiative of individual members to become active in a wider sphere and for a longer period; and the work itself can be better distributed and co-ordinated: 'Always and everywhere keeping in view the greater glory of God, each one of ours should be ready to perform, according to the commands of holy obedience, any works whatever of charity and humility'.[29]

In the document of 1620–21, the words of St Ignatius and his companions replace the instructions of 1615, which laid greater emphasis on the feminine character of the Institute. The over-all policy, however, remains the same. Mary Ward did not hesitate to adopt the main outlines of the immense sphere of work envisaged by the founder of the Society of Jesus:

> After a solemn vow of perpetual chastity, poverty and obedience, she is a member of a Society founded primarily for this purpose: to strive for the defence and propagation of the Faith and for the progress of souls in christian life and doctrine, leading them back from heresy and evil ways to the faith, to a christian manner of life and to special obedience to the Holy See.

From this it can be seen that the principal concern was to be the faith, its propagation and its confirmation. Individual works, which Mary now goes on to detail within the sphere of the broad activities of the Institute, have the same aim. Many of these have a special reference to the needs of the english mission. For example, the sisters are to 'assemble people and prepare them to attend public sermons and lectures'; they are to encourage catholics to receive the sacraments, to prepare them for this, and to see that priests were available when and where they were needed. Nor did the foundress forget 'women of doubtful virtue'; her sisters were also to prepare the way for them to receive the sacraments. She made a further reference to schooling and education, 'an apostolate which will be particularly efficacious for the universal good of the Church and the personal good of individuals, whether their vocation is to a life in the world or in religion'. There is no parallel provision in the ignatian rule. On the other hand, she did take over from the jesuit formula the all-embracing task of the ministry of the Word of God, religious and

[29] *Ratio Instituti*, cited in Chambers, Vol I, p 378.

catechetical instruction. Those who read and studied her formula must have been astonished to find that a woman envisaged members of her Institute having contact with the 'new religion' of the Reformation, that is, 'to help in reconciling those estranged from the Church'. Nor is the sphere of social work excluded from her programme: her sisters are to 'assist and serve prisoners and those in hospitals, in fact undertake any other works of charity which may seem proper to further the glory of God and the common good, yet altogether free of charge and without accepting any stipend for those labours'. This passage too is taken verbatim from Ignatius.

This far-seeing woman not only looked back to her native country; she also wished to serve the Church's mission overseas. With regard to the vow of obedience to the Pope, she expressed, in words taken from the ignatian formula, her readiness to go to foreign lands if the Popes 'are pleased to send us among the Turks or any other infidels, even those who live in the region called the Indies, or among any heretics whatever, or schismatics, or any faithful'.[30]

Mary Ward presented her *Institutum* to the Pope. When John Bennet, the representative of the english secular clergy in Rome, heard about it, he wrote to his brother Edward, the colleague of the late english archpriest: 'The Jesuitrices have exhibited ridiculous petitions which have scandalized this Court'.[31] In both drafts, the foundress had emphasized work for young women. For her, the instruction and education of young women were an essential part of concern for the proclamation and propagation of the gospel. This can also be seen from other, unfortunately rather slender, sources. The decisive criteria for these schools, as for every other work which the Institute would undertake, were to be the greater glory of God and the common good.[32]

Form of living

This comprehensive programme for the new Institute necessitated a form of life which would be entirely suited to the carrying out of the apostolic mission. She believed the customary enclosure, for example, to be incompatable with this life of service. Nor could Mary Ward see her way to adopting those aspects of community life which would cause her such trouble and misunderstanding. She

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[30] *Institutum*, see note 27.

[31] Letter dated 18 March, 1622, cited in Dodd's *Church History*, (ed. M. S. Tierney), Vol IV (London, 1841), p 109, n. 1.

[32] *Institutum*, see note 27, *supra*, p 83.

would do without the recitation of the divine office in choir; and she believed that the increasingly difficult penitential practices customary in the convents of her time were of no service to her Institute. She believed that all energies should be directed to the needs of the apostolate. In order to ensure proper co-ordination of the work, and its initiation in places of greatest need and greatest promise, the central direction of the houses would be placed in the hands of a Mother General. Mary also wished her Institute as a whole to be placed under the jurisdiction of the Pope; its members were to be ready to answer any call of the Pope, by virtue of a special vow of obedience.

In matters of day to day concern, the members were to 'follow the common and approved usage of reputable women'; in the *Institutum*, Mary Ward simply changes the genitive in the text of St Ignatius, *honestorum sacerdotum*, into *honestarum mulierum*. In the *Ratio Instituti* she had spoken of a 'mixed kind of life, such a life as we hold Christ, our Lord and Master, to have taught his disciples, such a life as his blessed Mother seems to have lived'. Mary took for her own the ideals of the early Church; she also names several virgins and widows of the apostolic and early Church periods. For this reason she desired 'an ordinary life' in which a reasonable mean could be maintained in all things and, as circumstances changed, fresh decisions could be continually made in the light of the spirit of God.

The role of apostolic women

It may be asked how Mary Ward could propose such a comprehensive programme for her sisters when the women religious of her time were so strictly confined by enclosure. Of course, St Hildegard had preached a sermon on the square outside Cologne Cathedral criticizing the clergy; and St Catherine of Siena had attempted to persuade the Pope to terminate his residence in Avignon. But the great women, the saints, of christian history had not been able to reverse the opinion of Virgil, later repeated by the Fathers of the Church, that woman is an unstable creature, not made in the image of God, as man is.[33] St Teresa of Avila was also conscious of the apostolic limitations she had to suffer simply because she was a woman. 'I know very well that a weak little woman like myself could do nothing'.[34] Had she been a man, she said, she would

[33] *The Aeneid IV*, 569. Cf also PL 17, 253, no. 147.

[34] Cf M. Auclair, *Das Leben der heiligen Teresia von Avila* (Zurich, 1953), pp 31, 173. One wonders if Mary Ward was acquainted with the 'Revelations' of her fourteenth-

gladly have gone overseas to preach the gospel to the heathen. Yet her indifferent opinion of herself and her sex did not prevent Teresa from doing great things. It was she who paved the way for the reformation of an order of men as well as of women.

In the England of the sixteenth century a far wider sphere of activity was open to women than was the case in countries south of the Alps. The achievements of english women in support of the Church in their country in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have still to be recounted in detail. Mary Ward well knew the immense debt which english catholics owed to these women. Writing in the period 1619–20, she referred to the apostolic services of catholic women in penal England and accommodated the aims of her Institute to them.[35]

Once Mary had realized that it was not of divine ordinance that women religious should serve only themselves, she was able to develop, uninhibited, her ideal of the apostolic woman and her potential for the service of mankind. From time to time, she had to defend her companions from influences which seriously threatened to frustrate their drive and enthusiasm for their vocation. As pioneers of a new way of life, her sisters needed conviction and courage. The foundress attempted to show them that women were not so hopelessly inferior to men as the word of a priest would seem to suggest, who spoke slightingly of their zeal: 'They are but women'. Zeal, as Mary explained, could lose its ardour; but this did not happen 'because we are women . . . but because we are unperfect women . . . *veritas Domini manet in aeternum* . . . It is not *veritas hominum*, verity of men or verity of women, but *veritas Domini*, and this verity women may have as well as men; if we faile, it is for want of this verity, and not because we are women'. She called her companions 'beginners of a course never thought of before'.

Though she did not hide the adverse opinions pronounced on their proposed status, Mary impressed upon her sisters that there were also people who expected a great deal from them, 'expecting all the world to be bettered by us'.[36] In Mary Ward there lived the consciousness of apostolic vocation whose dimensions had hardly

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century countrywoman, Julian of Norwich, who, whilst confessing that she was 'a woman unlettered, feeble and frail', expostulates: 'Because I am a woman should I therefore believe that I ought not to tell you about the goodness of God?' Cf *A Shewing of God's Love: the shorter version of the Revelations*, (ed. Anna Maria Reynolds, London 1958), ch VI.

[35] Cf *Rationes de subordinatione*, see note 23, *supra*, p 81.

[36] Mary Ward, First and Third Speech, in Chambers, Vol I, pp 409, 412.

ever before found expression in the Church. It belonged to her vision to see clearly the proportions of the mission waiting for women dedicated totally to the apostolate. She saw too that, in the organization and administration of her Institute, women had insight and talents for the leadership and guidance of women which men did not normally possess. This was why she included in her proposals a plan for a general congregation (chapter). At the same time, she was realist enough to admit that the scope of her Institute's mission, as she envisaged it, could never compete with the widespread activities of the Society of Jesus.[37]

Failure

The planning and introduction of the members to the new kind of apostolate to which these dedicated women were to devote themselves, could only succeed if the Apostolic See were to approve the project. Trusting in God and in her mission, Mary Ward went to Rome in 1621, and requested Gregory XV to recognize her Institute. (As could have been predicted, the superior general of the jesuits, Father Mutius Vitelleschi, though personally he had a very high opinion of this englishwoman, was not able to meet her request.) As a basis for the discussion of her request, she presented to the papal curia her *Institutum*, which contained on a single sheet all those aspects of the new order which must have immediately appeared as dangerous novelties. The Cardinals of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars did not dare to put forward this request to the pope for approval. In particular, her Institute proposed to abolish the enclosure. At the same time, they hesitated to give a negative reply to this high-minded and brave woman, even though letters of complaint and warnings from english priests were being sent to the pope.

The complaints of her compatriots, which naturally could be expected to receive a sympathetic understanding in Rome, concerned in particular the apostolic work of the sisters. In the *Informatio* of Archpriest William Harrison and his colleagues, it is stated that these 'jesuitesses' were setting themselves to the task of the conversion of England *(conversioni Angliae incumbere)*. The writers criticized the women for speaking about spiritual matters in the presence of priests and giving 'exhortations', in which they were particularly experienced in her novitiates. Similarly the benedictine, Robert

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[37] Cf *Rationes de subordinatione*, see note 23, *supra*, p 81.

Sherwood, complained to Gregory XV that they undertook missions in England and, 'like preacheresses and teachers instructed the people and endeavoured to awake them to repentance' *(tanquam praedicatrices et doctrices actus contritionis faciendi)*. Even the president of the english seminary at Douai, Matthew Kellison, in his report of 1622 to Propaganda, complained that they instructed the people in acts of penitence, contemplation and spiritual exercises.

In his long and detailed report, William Harrison particularly emphasized the dangers of false teaching if women were allowed to undertake this kind of work. He also alleged that the jesuitesses were an annoyance to catholics and a joke to the heretics, and that these women missionaries had failed to display the modesty which became their sex, that they were in moral danger and had a bad reputation. Sherwood's complaints are briefer, but a comparison of the two reports suggests a previous agreement about content and about synchronization of delivery in Rome.

During her first months in Rome, Mary Ward faced a wealth of such accusations. She had in fact not only written down her plans but some years previously she had already sent sisters to England. There is not, however, a scrap of evidence to justify the allegations of Harrison and Sherwood that these sisters were engaged in strictly ministerial functions. Such interpretations of their activity were, to say the least, wild exaggerations. Mary's companions did undertake religious instruction where this was possible, but they never preached. They instructed the people in the faith and in the practice of the christian life. As Mary Ward herself asserted, her work never overlapped with priestly functions, an allegation to be found amongst the accusations of 1622. Giving suggestions for awakening penitence can hardly be regarded as an activity to be restricted to priests. After all, every christian mother does the same. Indeed it is only necessary to read these accusations to appreciate how stereotyped and lacking in substance they were.

However, these documents reached Rome at the same time as Mary Ward, an unknown woman, arrived with her request to Pope Gregory XV. This step in itself was sensational enough. In addition, the roman authorities had little understanding of the situation of english catholics, or, indeed, of the internal conflicts between secular and regular which was bedevilling the missionary effort in England. It was inevitable that complaints made by missionary priests would have a very sympathetic hearing, especially when they were accompanied by assertions about the risk of scandal: who ever heard of

women religious who did not observe the enclosure? The representative of the english secular clergy in Rome both in 1622 and afterwards was able to find regular opportunities to repeat such criticisms with great effect, whenever Mary appeared to be making headway with her proposals.

From the slender evidence available, one becomes aware of her unwavering conviction of the authenticity of her own vocation, of the heroic quality of her perseverance which enabled her to endure the storm of opposition she encountered in Rome, and encouraged her to remain there and continue to work for the good of her Institute. One can also appreciate how much spiritual energy was required by Mary Ward and other foundresses of that time, and indeed by those who followed them, in order to make it possible for women religious to play an active part in the spreading of the gospel.

From the very beginning of her time in Rome, Mary Ward and her endeavours were in the shadows on two accounts; first, there were the objective difficulties inherent in the proposals she was making, and secondly, the complaints lodged against her by english priests.[38] She must soon have realized the hopelessness of her position. Yet, she was never diverted from her purpose, and bent all her energies to remove mistrust and opposition. She remained in Rome and, with the approval of the authorities, opened a school there. She also established communities in Naples and Perugia when she realized the apostolic need which women could supply in Italy. As far as the education of girls was concerned, the field was wide open for her. The roman primary school in the Via Monserrato soon had an enrolment of 120 to 150 girls. The house in Naples made good progress, though the foundation in Perugia never came to anything. After the election of Urban VIII as Pope, Mary Ward presented to him a further request for recognition. The agitation and discussion which it caused led to the closing of the italian houses of her nascent Institute in 1625. The reason alleged for the closure was the refusal to accept enclosure. The roman school was closed; the house in Perugia no longer existed. Only her companions in the city of Naples, which belonged to Spain, could continue their work.

Meantime, Mary herself, realizing that there was no longer anything to be gained by staying in Rome, travelled north in Novem-

[38] Cf the documents edited by J. Grisar, S.J., in *Die ersten Anklagen in Rom gegen das Institut Maria Wards* (1622); (Misc. Hist. Pont., Vol XXII, Rom 1959), pp 199–222, and the relevant details on pp 104–118.

ber, 1626. There she began her foundations: in Munich, Vienna and Pressburg (today Bratislava). The branches in Saint-Omer, Liège, Cologne and Trier originated in the years of her first journey to Rome. The rapid and successful spread of the order in Bavaria, Austria and Hungary aroused anxiety; information laid by the viennese cardinal, Bishop Klesl, caused proceedings to be initiated in Rome in 1628. These led to a decree of closure by the Congregation of the Propaganda.

Masculine prejudice, traditionalist ideas, and inadequate understanding of the needs of the Church in the northern countries, together combined to create a situation which convicted the foundress of obduracy and wilful disobedience. So it was that she fell into the hands of the Inquisition, and was imprisoned for more than two months in the *Angerkloster* in Munich. During this time Urban VIII issued the Bull *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis*, suppressing her Institute. The foundress submitted to the decision of the Pope. She lost neither her faith in the Church nor the conviction that God had entrusted a mission to her. When she died in 1645 in her native land, she did not speak of the sufferings of her life, but left with her companions thoughts which urged them on:

> She commended to us with greatest feeling the practice of God's vocation in us, that it be constantly, efficaciously and affectionately in all that belongs to the general and particular of the same. Said: God will assist and helpe you, it is noe matter the who, but the what; and when God, said she, shall enable me to be in place, I will serve you.[39]

Time and circumstances combined to defeat the realization of Mary Ward's vision for a total consecration and apostolic effectiveness in the Church, during her lifetime and for centuries afterwards. Yet her optimism never wavered: she knew how, 'with further patience to say "yes" to the sufferings to be endured'.[40] It was only later that the seed she sowed began to bear fruit.

For her, too, the words are valid which stand engraved on the tomb of Pope Adrian VI in the roman church of Santa Maria dell' Anima; 'How much the achievement of even the world's greatest men is dependent on the right moment!'

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[39] Letter of Mary Poyntz to Barbara Babthorpe, 3 February 1645, cited in Chambers, Vol II, p 499.

[40] Cf R. Schutz, *Die Gewalt der Friedfertigen* (Herderbücherei 421, 1972), p 58.