

THE HERITAGE

By PIA BUXTON

MARY WARD'S BODY has never been found, nor has it been easy to identify and name the influence and the distribution of the heritage she left to apostolic women in the Church. She founded in two ways: she had the enthusiasm and vision to respond generously to the needs she saw around her with the ability to give them form, and, more significantly, she was a foundress who gave to the Church a new charism, a newly formed spirituality for women.

There are two obvious examples of Mary Ward's response to need. First, from her experience of living in a persecuted Church she saw the needs and the potential for educating the women who had such a profound influence on the faith of the households they managed. Her concern gave rise to the novelty and the standard of the schools she founded wherever the sisters settled in Europe during her lifetime. It also caused her to insert into the *Formula Instituti* of the Society of Jesus, when she adopted it as the plan of her own Institute, the words '... by educating girls in day and boarding schools ...' (1621).¹ This has shaped the tradition of all three branches of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Inevitably however there was a danger in this: with the school commitment, the plant, the success, went the possibility of entrenchment and a narrowing of the original apostolic horizons. Secondly, in response to another need revealed by experience, in 1609 she founded and endowed a Poor Clare convent for english exiles in Flanders. After many vicissitudes this eventually came to and remained at Darlington. It was her foundation, but its charism and spirit, despite the sisters beginning their life there with the thirty days Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, were naturally that of St Clare and St Francis.

But it is one thing to describe Mary Ward's founding response to need, another to describe her God-given charism as a foundress. To understand that, and to appreciate the extent of her influence and the nature of her inheritance, we have to look at her insight into the mystery of the kingdom rather than at the details of her service of it. She brought a feminine perception and expression to the vision and the policy that the 'first companions' had given to the Society of Jesus, thus opening up to women the graced insight of a specific and essential aspect of the gospel and of a way of incarnating it in a life and mission that could be shared by others

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and approved by the Church. Her charism gives day-to-day, place-by-place expression to a particular understanding of the mystery of Christ. Her spirituality is one of relatedness, wholeness, cohesion and more significantly still, it is a spirituality of awareness—awareness finely tuned both to the inner ‘movements of the spirits’ stimulated by contemplation of the Word incarnate and to the realities of the surrounding world. She discerns, acts, lives out of her consciousness of God in all things. It is at the level of spiritual consciousness that the individual is most acutely sensitive to the Word and the presence of God, and from this living encounter, conversion and the work of grace evolve. The encounter is personal and individual; and it is not surprising that both in writings and in the *Painted Life*² Mary Ward should be found ministering to the individual man and woman in her concern for the care of souls. She found in the jesuit Constitutions the organization for a way of life which both fixed the vision at its high point and also plotted the path to be followed by individual members through the process of training and on into their personal distribution in the Lord’s vineyard.

The prosecution of Mary Ward’s work during her life time was so rigorous that her heritage has had a chequered and defensive history, and inevitably, a variety of interpretations, taking shape in more ways than will ever be known. It is most easily traced among the congregations that claim her as foundress or who, through her heritage, have received something of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. The Institute founded by Mary Ward in London in 1609 was not fully approved by the Church until 1877; Mary Ward was officially acknowledged as foundress in 1909 and the Constitutions presented by her for approval in Rome in 1622 were permitted, for the original branch, in 1978. Fragments of the original plan are found along the way, and their spasmodic appearance, appreciation and sometimes dispersal give a precious and tenuous link pointing back to the original english copy of the Constitutions which Mary Ward possessed, treasured and worked on from about 1615 to 1622.³ A constitution, about two-thirds according to that of the Society of Jesus, was granted in 1707. It came to the Bar Convent, York, and was taken by Theresa Ball, after her noviciate there, to Dublin in 1821 when she initiated the second branch of the Institute, commonly known as the Loretos. In 1848 the north american branch was founded from Ireland. Today the three branches, all calling Mary Ward foundress, have three separate generalates.

Mary Aikenhead was trained in York from 1812 to 1815. She returned to Ireland to found the Irish Sisters of Charity, taking

with her the eighty-one rules from the 'Summary of the Rule' of the Society of Jesus used by the Institute from 1703 to 1978. Interestingly, finding the need for less enclosure and more flexibility, in 1833 the Irish sisters asked for and obtained a very close rendering of the full Jesuit Constitutions in English—probably the first congregation of women to do so and certainly the first of those linked to Mary Ward to obtain what she had wanted.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century extracts from the same eighty-one rules were requested from the Institute by Father Varin to enable Saint Julie Billiart and Françoise Blin de Bourdon to compile a provisional rule for the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur;⁴ they also saw the need to expand this limited legislation to allow for greater mobility, central governance and reduced enclosure. Like so many nineteenth century European congregations of women they too were groping towards a structure that would establish the developing mission of apostolic religious women.

In the second plan of the Institute⁵ Mary Ward had written to Paul V '... our native country stands greatly in need ...' Something of both her spirituality and her longing to serve her own country with it are echoed in two diocesan congregations whose foundation was assisted by the Loreto branch of the Institute: firstly, in India, the Daughters of St Anne for Adivasi sisters at Ranchi in 1885, and later for Bengali sisters in Bengal (these sisters now number a thousand); secondly, in South Africa, the Daughters of the Immaculate Heart founded for Lebowa sisters in the nineteen-forties.

The first words of the roughly carved epitaph on Mary Ward's great gravestone stand out with increasing significance: 'To love the poor ...' After twenty years as a Loreto sister Mother Teresa of Calcutta left them in 1948 to found her Missionaries of Charity for helping the destitute poor. She took with her an abiding love for Mary Ward and an appreciation of her gift to the Church and to the world. In 1951, addressing the World Congress of Catholic Action, Pius XII spoke of the progressive introduction of women into modern apostolates. He recalled 'two great figures of Catholic history, one, Mary Ward, that woman beyond comparison ...' (The other was St Vincent de Paul). Mary Ward had an authenticity of spirituality that came from living out of what she saw, out of what gave meaning to her life, not out of response to external expectation, convention or support; it is a prophetic role, suffered again and again by those who see and initiate new things. What is *The long loneliness*, title of Dorothy Day's autobiography, if not the same as that described by Mary Ward in a letter of

1624? 'I think, dear child, that the trouble and the long loneliness you heard me speak of is not far from me . . .'. Earlier she had written in retreat notes under the heading, 'The Loneliness': 'I saw there was no help nor comfort for me, but to cleave fast to him, and so I did, for he was there to help me'.⁶

I believe Mary Ward subjected her desire for approval and even the survival of the Institute to the demands of the God-given vision entrusted to her. She refined the founding charism of response to need by Constitutions aimed consistently at seeking always the greater and the more, thus ensuring the possibility of continuous adaptation to change; but more importantly, with the sure touch of a truly inspired and gifted founder, she gave priority, again and again, to her God-given charism and spirituality over ecclesiastical suggestion or acceptance. If this had not been the case her perception and energy would have been deflected into some other existing and approved course. She was in fact urged to take the rules of St Teresa, or St Clare or St Angela Merici or others. If she had, she would have left us neither her vision nor the tools to incarnate it; she would not have been a foundress. Even today, the idealist may ask, where is the congregation she founded, the congregation that really grasps and lives what she envisaged? Has it yet been born in a religious family? Or is it wonderfully but anonymously scattered about and lived among many lay and religious communities who do not know that this 'way' for women was seen and planned and suffered for by a woman who was born four hundred years ago?

NOTES

¹ *Institutum* 1, Vatican Library, Fondo Capponi 47, ff 57-62. Published in *I.B.V.M. Constitutions* (Rome 1979).

² I.B.V.M. Provincial House, Augsburg.

³ Letter of Bishop Blaise of St Omer. See Chambers: *Life of Mary Ward* vol 1 p 296.

⁴ *A history of the Rules and Constitutions of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur*, by Sister Julie de La Sainte Famille. S.N.D. Archives.

⁵ *Memorial of Mary Ward and the english virgins to Paul V*, 1616. Chambers: *Life of Mary Ward* vol 1 p 375.

⁶ The 'Various Papers' of Mary Ward. I.B.V.M. Archives, Ascot, England.