MARY WARD'S VISION OF THE APOSTOLIC RELIGIOUS LIFE

By LAVINIA BYRNE

I HAVE two favourite museums: Kettle's Yard in Cambridge and the Railway Museum in York. Both are 'Please touch' museums where the exhibits are placed not in glass cases or behind barriers, but rather on open display to be handled and used. They are not doomed to exist only as relics of a bygone age, their value attributed strictly to antiquity and rarity. Instead they may inform our present and we, by using them, may bring fresh life, a fresh existence to them in turn.

If this is true of museum pieces, how much more true is it of ideas or models which originate in the past, but which we validate by using them now. The founding charism of religious orders is a case in point. For Mary Ward, Ignatius's *Constitutions*[1] were 'Please touch' material to be taken and used in the Church's service.

Much work has been done to demonstrate the origins of the *Constitutions* in the *Spiritual Exercises,* and the origins of the *Exercises* in the life experience of Ignatius as recollected in his *Autobiography.* The task of the present article is not to analyze this genesis but, while admitting it, to show what Mary Ward both sought and found when she turned to the ignatian *Constitutions* as a model by which to live the apostolic religious life. It is written in the conviction that we may come to the same source in order to clarify our present-day understanding of the religious life and come with her temerity. The model still works; we might ask 'why?' and 'how?' or more accurately 'how in today's Church and today's world?'

What Mary Ward sought

In contemporary language we would say Mary Ward sought a way to incorporate women's ministries into the one mission of the Church. The Church's mission is derived from the mission within the Trinity, whereby the Son is sent and Father and Son in turn send the Spirit. The Church is essentially apostolic, sent into the world as an assurance of presence. Jesus's own assurance 'Lo, I stand among you as one who serves' (Lk 22, 27), gives first place

to the presence guaranteed by mission and only then to the service of ministry. His own ministries of healing, feeding and teaching those who came to him were at once a consequence of the Incarnation and the model for all christian apostolic service. Their purpose is redemptive; to build us into wholeness so that we may become what we are, at once human and christian.

This process of becoming is the common vocation, to be pursued in marriage or the single life, clerical or religious life, as man or woman, as child or adolescent. Mary Ward heard and chose to answer the call specifically in terms of the religious life. In her early *Italian Autobiography* she wrote, 'When I was about fifteen years old I had a religious vocation, which grace by the mercy of God has been so continuous that not for one moment since then have I had the least thought of embracing a contrary state'. A vocation—that balance of call, response and fresh call—is lived out within time, and so God's grace must needs be continuous. It would lead Mary Ward to a vision of the religious life we today take for granted, where women might be sent by women to minister within the Church.

Her starting point was that envisaged by Ignatius in his Contemplation of the Incarnation (Exx 101–109), namely human need. All mission, all ministry have to have this as their perspective; we serve people, not ideas or institutions. As an Englishwoman in the seventeenth-century Church she perceived such need both in spiritual and material terms. Catholics in England, she discovered, particularly when she returned there in October 1609 after failing to find God's will in the monastic life of the Poor Clares, needed the support of spiritual conversation, the presence of consecrated religious in their midst, a degree of spiritual literacy to survive in a beleaguered Church. They needed formation, preparation for the sacraments, especially confession, and whatever might tend to their spiritual consolation. The *Italian Autobiography* records these beginnings:

> I returned to England for some months with the intention of trying to do good to others, and, as far as I can judge, 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. My few labours were not altogether in vain, divers now living holily in various religious orders say that they left the world in great part through my conversation.[2]

Amongst those who 'left the world' as a result of conversing with the twenty-four-year old Mary Ward were her first companions, and although she judged that she 'did not spend her time ill',

detractors soon gathered accusations against them. By 1622 these received formal expression in letters sent to Rome by three secular priests, Fathers Harrison, Sherwood and Kellison. Inevitably Mary Ward was caught in the crossfire of the controversy between the secular and regular clergy operating in England, so that some of the opposition was political, and Father Sherwood in particular could claim: 'In England they are introduced everywhere by the Jesuits, and they themselves introduce the Jesuits to the families known to them, excluding the secular clergy and other religious orders.'

Other accusations are more objective, and give a far clearer picture of what Mary Ward was seeking and her manner of proceeding. The english mission, human need in the lived experience of Catholics in England, demanded mobility on the part of her sisters, so we read 'They gad about in town and country'. Mobility goes hand in hand with the ability to adapt and modify: 'They sometimes dress like noble ladies and drive abroad in fine carriages; and sometimes like servants.' As if this were not confusing enough: 'It sometimes happens that they are together with men alone; they even associate with bad characters', and 'they undertake everything possible under the pretext of charity'. Both social and religious custom have to be reappraised and submitted to a new standard, that of the apostolic imperative:

> They are sent as preachers to proclaim the faith to heretics. They teach how to arouse contrition. They pray only in private, have no office in choir. They do not conform to feminine modesty. They speak at meetings on spiritual matters, even in the presence of priests, and give exhortations, to which they are trained in their noviceship. They have set the conversion of England as their goal and work for it like priests.

On the Continent her sisters could provide education for the young women of the families to whom they would minister in England, and, increasingly, education for girls of whatever provenance, because once again this ministry met contemporary need. Women could thereby enjoy the same educational opportunities as men. Their critics claimed 'they allow their pupils to act plays and to speak in public', and 'they gad about in order to attract young women to enter with them'.

Both divine intervention and this interplay between apostolic response to human need and official criticism gave a new focus to Mary Ward's search. From 1611 onwards her conviction was that her sisters should adopt the jesuit *Constitutions*. To the Apostolic Nuncio of Lower Germany, Monsignore Albergati, she wrote:

> 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 light in that particular Institute, comfort and strength, and so changed the whole soul, as that impossible for me to doubt, but that they came from him whose words are works.

The experience of ministering in England and on the Continent now led her to the jesuit Institute or way of proceeding. She sought more than a canonical or even a theological footing; she sought a working model.

What Mary Ward found

The jesuit *Constitutions* form an organic whole. Underpinning the whole structure is the attitude of indifference or freedom of heart necessary for growth and balance. Indifference is the ground-plan which enables mission to find expression in ministries and sustains the tension or dynamic of apostolic religious life.

In this primary insight Mary Ward might root and develop her own understanding of freedom as given in the vision she had of a Just Soul while contemplating the words, *Et vocabis nomen ejus Jesum,* in 1615;

> The felicity of this course (forasmuch 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 . . .

A pattern is implied, for if there is a freedom from all that might make one cling or adhere to partial security, there is also a freedom for, a disposition and whole-hearted commitment to service as the means to seek and find God in all things. This pattern forms a spirituality of the apostolic life, as applicable to the lay as to the consecrated state.

In terms of such indifference it becomes possible to map out the relationship of the body of the Institute (considered as consecrated human resource) to the end of the Institute (its apostolic purpose). Ignatius defines both: 'This body is composed of its members' (*Constitutions,* 135). Each Jesuit 'may better save and perfect his own soul by helping other souls, his neighbours' (*Constitutions,* 52).

The question becomes: how may the energy of the body be converted into apostolic service and God's redemptive purpose flower in the salvation of humanity? Every understanding of the nature of common life, the vows, the selection of ministries, external factors such as formal studies, internal factors such as progress in virtue and the relationship between the legislative and executive, is subject to this question.

For Mary Ward the question has already posed itself. She needed to know how to give an apostolic edge to the organization of her nascent Institute. In the *Constitutions* she found both the question and a clearly formulated answer. Each man, or in her own case each woman, is called into the body in order to be sent. The call is in Christ, an extension of the baptismal call; the sending is in Christ, an extension of baptismal consecration. Everything demanded by the call is subjected to the further process of mission in order that all the energy and resourcefulness of the body be translated into apostolic service.

The common life has an inner spirit and a public face. Ignatius relates his understanding of both to the service of humanity. For it is the love individual Jesuits have for God which will bind them together and the love he has for them that will keep them together as actual friends, united among themselves and bringing God's love into the world:

> The chief bond to cement the union of members among themselves and with their head is, on both sides, the love of God our Lord. For when the superior and subjects are closely united to his Divine and Supreme Goodness, they will very easily be united among themselves, through that same love which will descend from the Divine Goodness and *spread to all other men* . . . (*Constitutions,* 67).

The public face of the common life is similarly ordered:

> In other respects, for sound reasons and with attention always paid *to the greater service of God,* in regard to what is exterior the manner of living is ordinary (*Constitutions,* 8).

God is named as the 'Divine and Supreme Goodness', the giver of every gift. As such he was known to Mary Ward when she wrote from Liège in 1619: 'O my God, how liberal are you, and how rich are they to whom you will vouchsafe to be a friend'. She went on to claim: 'Those only truly love who are wholly God's, and such only are strong and apt for all such good works as are in this world to be done', and 'Let thy love be at all times rooted

in God and then remain faithful to thy friend.' Where the inner spirit of the common life is informed by love it will assume a public face that is ordinary, that is to say consonant with the apostolic life, for 'zeal for souls is more highly to be prized in our state than visions and ecstasies; for zeal is necessary for us'.

The way in to this common life of the body of the Society, as a dispensation where God may be known as giver, lies in that mutuality of gift we call the vows. Vowed chastity, Ignatius considered, needed 'no explanation'; perhaps we might be happier with no justification, as he goes on to say that it must be 'presupposed'. The commitment is to love people non-possessively; to bring to chastity attitudes we might otherwise associate with poverty. For where love is given, it does not have to be grasped, or for that matter hoarded. So Mary Ward would write:

> I saw suddenly and very clearly that the gift of chastity . . . was always a peculiar gift of God, and not conjoined to the nature of flesh and blood though endowed with reason, or in the power of man either to bring forth or conserve in himself (Liège 1619).

Vowed poverty Ignatius describes as 'the strong wall of the religious life' and 'a bulwark of religious institutions which preserves them in their existence and discipline and defends them from many enemies' (*Constitutions,* 816). Where chastity is the primary way in to the body, poverty is the great preserver of the common life, the guarantee that God is trusted as giver. The commitment here is to love things, the material order, chastely, and so Ignatius speaks of loving poverty 'as a mother'. From her most extreme experience of actual poverty, the poverty of total dispossession in the Anger prison, Mary Ward similarly fell back on an image that speaks of God's maternal love: 'Our Lord and Master is also our Father and gives no more than is ladylike and most easy to be borne'.

Vowed obedience occupies a more central position in Ignatius's text, meanwhile, as the virtue which enables mission. Mission converts God's salvific will into apostolic service. Obedience both disposes a man for such service and enables specific ministries to be chosen, because the process of discernment is operative. So obedience always has a double perspective. On the one hand a man prepares himself by speaking openly about himself and the discernment begins; with prayer and seeking advice, God's purpose for an individual achieves a certain focus. On the other hand a comparable openness becomes accountability when a man reports back from a ministry he has already undertaken. Obedience pre-

cedes mission and follows mission, because its deepest purpose is to promote the discernment and furtherance of God's salvific will.

An equally central section of Mary Ward's own Third Plan of the Institute demonstrates quite clearly, I believe, her appropriation of this fundamental insight: obedience is always and necessarily for mission; by obedience the body of the Institute may serve the end of the Institute. The Third Plan dates from 1620. It is considerably shorter than the two previous plans of 1611 and 1615 and only eighteen per cent of the text is Mary Ward's own. The rest is taken straight from the *Formula Instituti* of the Society of Jesus. For this reason the four hundred words from Mary Ward's pen demand close attention. One section treats of appropriate ministries, another section—the more significant one in this context—treats of the relationship of the Institute with the Holy See. This passage follows directly on the section from the *Formula* of the jesuit *Constitutions* which describes the vow of obedience to the pope, the characteristic fourth vow Mary Ward evidently wished to retain. She elaborates:

> For reason and experience teach us that religious congregations receive more abundant blessings from God our Creator and Lord, and are most fruitful for the universal good of the Catholic Church which depend immediately and solely upon the Apostolic See; they are thereby more closely united to God, receiving his grace with greater assurance and in fuller measure. We therefore most humbly beg that the entire hierarchical structure of this work should depend entirely upon the Holy See, and not on any other authority, that in the person of its highest Superior, therefore, it may receive light and life for the whole body.

Men and women approach the articulation of authority from two different standpoints: men from a position of power, women—particularly women in a counter-reformation Church—from a position of enclosure or relative powerlessness. Yet Mary Ward's is a theological rather than a political insight. She came to the Church seeking unity with Christ as Creator and Lord, and unity with the guidance of the Spirit. Where 'the entire hierarchical structure of this work' might be rooted in the Church's mission, vowed obedience could guarantee the end of the Institute. The work would be one with the Church's work.

Works, meanwhile, or actual ministries are also subject to scrutiny in Ignatius's scheme of things. The imperative is that of the 'more' or greater glory of God. Ignatius sought 'spiritual fruit', that his men might share in God's work as creator and redeemer,

making the world good and finding it good. Logically there are no proper works, no particular work that is mandatory. Rather every ministry must be judged in terms of the end of the Society.

Mary Ward brought her own experience to bear upon this understanding. Where a Church gives priestly ordination only to men, woman's ministry can be seen either as an expression of lay ministry and focus attention away from the question of orders and sacramental practice, or as running parallel to the ministry of ordained priests, focussing attention upon Church and sacraments. As a woman of her age, of her country and of her Church, Mary Ward in the other section of the Third Plan which must receive more detailed attention, saw things in terms of complementarity. So she writes of 'labouring for the spiritual consolation of the faithful by encouraging them to go to confession and to the other sacraments, preparing them for their reception', and 'seeing that preachers and spiritual fathers are sent to the cities and to remote places, seeking out women of doubtful lives and preparing them to receive the grace of the sacraments'; adding that 'in this way, preachers and missioners of God's Church will have more leisure to devote themselves to more important and universal tasks.' As a woman of the Kingdom, a woman for all seasons, she spoke in more universal categories by seeking to adopt the jesuit *Constitutions* in the first place and training her companions to give the Spiritual Exercises from which they originate.

As preparation for the apostolic life and as a way of building up the body Ignatius proposes both interior and exterior means. The interior means are goodness and virtue—especially charity—a pure intention of serving God, familiarity with God, and sincere zeal for souls. The exterior means are well grounded and solid learning, a method of proposing it to others, and the art of dealing and conversing with people. In that the body of the Society consists of the individual men who make up this body, what is implied here is personal development. A man who is more human, more christian, is a better Jesuit—as companion and as apostle. For this reason Mary Ward would say 'in our calling, a cheerful mind, a good understanding and a great desire after virtue are necessary, but of all these a cheerful mind is the most so'.

By way of comment upon her own personality and disposition, this chance remark has the advantage of being totally unselfconscious. Similarly, the ninth part of Ignatius's *Constitutions* are as much a portrait of the man as a description of the office of General. Words like legislative and executive—or rather, their contemporary equivalent—had increasingly to form part of Mary Ward's vocabulary. Circumstances demanded that she be clear about her own

role and place within the Institute, and once again the *Constitutions* furnished her with a formula. As General Superior, her role was to be executive, the *Constitutions* or General Congregation being the legislative body. As the person who sends members of the body to the apostolic end of the Institute, hers would be a double charge: for the whole body and for the end the Institute seeks. The *Constitutions* share this double focus in that they too are for 'the good of those who live in the Institute' and 'for the greater divine service'.

As to her own spirituality, she saw in this ninth part that Ignatius demanded that the General be marked by six qualities, 'in relation to God, what perfects his heart, understanding and execution; and further still, those qualities of body and those extrinsic goods which help him' (*Constitutions,* 724). In this presentation of the first of these qualities Ignatius writes,

> that he should be closely united with God our Lord and intimate with him in prayer and all his actions, that from God, the fountain of all good, the General may so much the better obtain for the whole body of the Society a large share of his gifts and graces, and also great power and efficacy for all the means which will be used for the help of souls (*Constitutions,* 723).

A pattern is established. The themes are union with God, a contemplative seeking and finding of him in all things—in prayer as in action—and the General's place in interceding for the body of the Society and for its articulation in ministry. This is a definition of apostolic spirituality at its most developed. Mary Ward's writings testify to her familiarity with God, her knowledge of him from the heart. What she could learn here is a method of living out that love in service of his world.

Mary Ward came to Ignatius's text seeking just that. As a working model the *Constitutions* informed her every understanding, and enabled her to answer God's call to the apostolic religious life with both theological and spiritual conviction.

Present-day understanding of the religious life

This presentation is necessarily brief and leaves gaps. Nevertheless the challenge is evident and could be taken up in various ways. There are specialist questions to do with the vows, for instance, or practical questions about the interplay between the demands of common life and the apostolate, questions about the relative value of certain ministries, about first and further formation, about apostolic spirituality.

Moreover, the Church has recently brought new material to bear upon any analysis of the religious life in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. How does the apostolic dynamic discovered in Ignatius's *Constitutions* speak to the Church's continuing difficulty with the relative merits of the religious and lay state as formulated in canon 573?

> Life consecrated through profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living, in which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, and are totally dedicated to God, who is supremely loved.

How would she read Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's comment on this text?

> To say that consecrated life is a stable form of life in which some faithful 'follow Christ more closely' necessarily implies—since it is a question of formal definition—that such believers are contrasted with others, who can only be understood to follow Christ *less closely*. The impression given is that those who belong to institutes of consecrated life are by definition more perfect that those who do not. In other words, we appear to be confronted with the concept of 'state of perfection' which was consciously abandoned by Vatican II.[4]

Would her experience of mobility and peregrination have something to say to another equally central but less controversial finding of the new Code, namely that 'the fraternal union of the members, rooted and based in charity, is to be an example of universal reconciliation in Christ' (canon 602)?

She would not have liked the word 'fraternal', but the rooting of union 'in charity' rather than in externals such as dress or a common ministry or uniformity she would have understood. Companionship was a reality she knew from the inside, and enjoyed with Mary Poyntz, Barbara Babthorpe, Winifred Wigmore, Frances Bedingfeld, Catherine Smith and countless other young women moved by her example. If such companionship is to model reconciliation, community must give the witness envisaged by the new Code. Canon 675(1) insists 'the whole life of its members is to be imbued with an apostolic spirit'. Apostolic community is not something localised or even physical, so that its boundaries, what we have traditionally called cloister, are to be 'appropriate to the character and mission of the Institute' (canon 667, (1)). Certainly the religious life must model community, but

the emphasis for apostolic religious is upon being community for others, upon taking reconciliation wherever one goes.

Other questions must likewise preoccupy religious; questions from a world that wants to understand—the world of christian unity, the world where any one of us could be made redundant, the familiar world of bus queues and supermarket shopping, the world of changing populations and age-structures, of empty churches and full discos, of doctors' waiting-rooms and hospices for the terminally ill, of newspaper headlines and instant television coverage, a world in which people find it hard to love and to share and to serve. The challenge to religious life from this world has been examined by Kenneth Leech in an article on 'The future of monasticism' but the same argument obtains when applied to non-monastic orders:

> From the margins of society, what role has the monastic community to play within the society of the anti-vows? There is the *social role,* the commitment to *koinonia,* to the common life which is the sign of the resurrection and of the new order. It is not an attack on materialism which is needed today, so much as an attack on false spirituality which denies that the social life of the City of God has anything to do with this order.
>
> The *humanist role,* the commitment to *sarx,* to the sacredness of the flesh, to a way of loving which does not shun sexuality but deepens and transforms it.
>
> The *political role,* the commitment to *krisis,* to the judgement which obedience to the Father necessarily brings upon the false orders of this age, the judgement which makes contemplation a subversive activity by its very nature.[5]

This is the face adopted by human need nowadays. Ignatius was convinced that God's salvific will might be shaped to human need by the continuing presence of apostles sent into the world in Christ's name. Mary Ward, in turn knew that women might mission and minister to this need as well as men. In God she found her meaning, her answer to the question 'why?'; in the *Constitutions* her method, her answer to the question 'how?' These answers can inform our present, but to validate Mary Ward's spirituality and practice in today's Church and today's world we need her temerity.

The apostolic religious life, if it is to survive, has to look at its own imperatives. In attempting to value and maintain the institution itself, we have sometimes lost sight of the individuals and failed to promote their growth into the perfection of christian

wholeness. Arguably there is no such thing as the religious life, rather there are religious, consecrated men and women who are called to be alive in God's service. As pioneer, as fearless woman, Mary Ward challenges our practice, makes us come alive, grow, change and develop. What motivates us? Whom do we serve? What is the news we bring? Are we free to face questions such as these? They have answers of course, and answers that will demand a great deal—the sort of sacrifice that God can make holy with the gift of new life. Concern with human need means working on a human scale, with people as people, not from within institutions as institution. Concern with human need means taking the demands of justice seriously, identifying with the marginalized, being found with the lowly and the starving, with those who look to God and not to systems for salvation. Ministry to this need necessitates new forms of community, new styles of community life, radical solutions to radical problems, a vision of community in which there is no 'them' and 'us', no 'outside' nor 'inside'.

Mary Ward was nothing if not a radical. Her vision remains unrealized where the apostolic religious life is reduced to something anodyne and monolithic: a museum piece, a vestige of a former age. We must take it out and touch it, and allow ourselves to be touched and transformed by it.

NOTES

[1] I have used the *Constitutions* in the translation by George E. Ganss (St. Louis, 1970) throughout.
[2] The *Italian Autobiography* and other texts are not yet available in print. Certain of Mary Ward's writings appear in Catherine Chambers's biography of 1885.
[3] *The code of canon law in english translation* (London, 1983).
[4] Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome: 'Religious life according to the new Code' *Religious Life Review* (Supplement to Doctrine and Life) vol 22, Nov/Dec 1983.
[5] Leech, Kenneth: *The social God* (London, 1981), pp 84,85.