

PROPHECY AND INSTITUTION

By MARGARET ORDWAY

IN THE MIDST of the celebrations for Mary Ward's four hundredth anniversary it is helpful to reflect upon her prophetic role. Looking back on her struggle for a mode of religious life appropriate to her times, one marvels at her courage while grieving at her pain. Women religious today have much in common with her as they try to understand what should be the prophetic element in their call. They sense that when understood as prophetic signs their vows have significant meaning. Seen as prophetic signs they can serve to challenge the dominant culture's distorted value of property, pleasure and power. Religious, both women and men, in the course of challenging, run the risks inherent in the prophetic. Mary Ward incurred these risks. Her prophetic ministry sought a different awareness of the role of women and of religious life for women. Her personal longing for change flew in the face of public conviction that was supported by powerful church structures. Her experience of challenging the established security of both is one that has within it some directions for the prophetic journey of each believer.

Mary Ward drew from her religious experience a message for the Church which was to open for it a new future. The manner of her growing up in England taught her that the gift of faith was precious enough to die for, that the clandestine Church there was attractive, a suffering-servant Church, peopled by martyrs, and frequent occasions for risk-taking nurtured her ability for decision-making, and led her to take upon herself as woman the responsibility of being Church.

Several events shaped the form this responsibility would take. In the course of them she was forced to stand still, look long and steadily into the face of God and wait to know his plans. It was an attitude that fitted her to be a spokeswoman for God. When she understood she was to become a religious, she slipped away from her suffering land to an enclosed order on the continent. Though at first she felt confirmed in her desire to live religious life with enclosure, she came to see that such was not her call. Less than wise direction had taken her through the painful events of these three years. She wrote, however, concerning them: 'Here

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may be seen the greatness of my obligation to God who willed to make use of every occasion for my greater good'. She returned to England and entered with other women and men into the dangerous underground of the recusant Church.

The sheer variety of this ministry, among other things, made her realize how uniquely God is expressed in every person, and how necessary was woman's experience in serving him in all his people. Slowly the vision of unenclosed women religious took shape, to be ineradicably rooted within her by three great graces. These special insights have come to be known as the charism of her Institute.

Charism, described as a gift, is a call to service. Its exercise is directed not solely toward the self-development of the individual and the congregation, but as well toward the extension of the reign of God. In church documents it is described as 'an experience of the Spirit', to be 'lived, safeguarded, deepened and constantly developed in harmony with the Body of Christ, continually in the process of growth'.

The three events that constitute the charism of Mary Ward's Institute enshrine the important spoken words that identify the Institute, define the vocation of its members, and establish it as a prophetic sign within the Church.

The first event, known as the 'glory vision', took place when Mary was twenty-four. She had just returned from her experience of enclosed life, still not knowing what God willed for her. But in the midst of the apostolic ministry just spoken of, she understood 'with an inexpressible clarity and certainty' that 'some other thing was determined' for her; she writes:

I did not see what the assured good thing would be, but the glory of God that was to come through it showed itself inexplicably and so abundantly as to fill my soul in such a way that I remained for a good space without feeling or hearing anything but the sound of 'glory, glory, glory'.

She experienced great happiness.

Uncertain, however, as to the form of the 'assured good thing' to which she was being called, she forced herself to wait on God. Meanwhile her fine capacities to direct her personal energies toward him were enriched by another dimension, that of the service of others. The moment of the glory vision marks the beginning of the Institute's mission.

The second event reveals in what way she was to structure the Institute for this mission. Church law of the time dealt only with

enclosed women religious, leading monastic lives and governed by men. This was a way of life she saw to be incompatible with her call to apostolic ministry. In 1611 she saw clearly her way of proceeding. She would model her Institute according to the spirit and constitutions of St Ignatius: 'Take the same of the Society'. Until the end of her life, she remained true to her conviction that this insight had been given her directly by God.

Some years after the event she says, 'These are the words whose worth cannot be valued, nor the good they contain too dearly bought'. The task entrusted to her was etched out. She would bring to realization a new kind of religious life for women, free of enclosure, governed by women; it would be an instrument of service, more supple, more inconspicuous, in closer contact with people, better adapted and more sensitive to the needs and developments of the time.

The structure of the new Institute required that it relate prophetically to the world with contemplative ardour and courageous action. She pondered the kind of spirituality that would give this kind of ministry a significant gospel-presence. In 1615 as a result of another significant spiritual experience she understood what this would be. Her main concern henceforth was to foster in her companions an interior attitude of freedom, justice and truth; 'grounded in these virtues', she wrote, 'we should obtain at God's hands true wisdom and ability to perform all such good things as the perfection of the Institute exacts of us'.

For Mary Ward freedom meant that she and her companions were to have free hands and free hearts in order to care for God's concerns. She speaks of 'a great confidence that God will do his will', and the freedom of themselves 'to refer all to him'. Justice for Mary Ward has its biblical meaning: the light of God's face shines upon his people and they are made just, pleasing in his sight. This justice is given freely for the sake of their sisters and brothers with whom they share it freely. Truth had various meanings for her. One she expressed often was the truthfulness resulting from the harmony between one's interior attitude and its exterior expression.

These three events of charismatic worth took place between 1609 and 1615. With courage born of the light she had received in the course of these events, Mary Ward fleshed out the form of her Institute. Why should women not ask for the same recognition as had been granted earlier to an order of men? Were men—and the hierarchy of the Church was entirely male—fearful of the consequences of giving so much freedom to women? As charisma her plan bore the necessary elements of genuine originality and of

special initiative for the life of the Church. Her fidelity to the Lord and docility to his Spirit led her to the humble unselfish service needed by many. Long before her application to Rome for the confirmation of the Institute in 1621 and in the years after that, and before the suppression in 1631, she tasted as a daily ration the sufferings attendant on the realization of new ideas. Her suffering authenticates her charism in the way the gospel-grain determines its final fruit. But how does one gauge the degree of suffering required to have established Mary Ward's charism as 'an experience of the Spirit'? Almost three hundred years were to pass before her prophetic achievement was publicly recognized. Perhaps something of an answer lies in the nature and function of prophecy itself in the life of the Church.

Today the terms prophecy, the prophet and prophetic signs are used with greater frequency and growing conviction in both secular and religious contexts. There is a new body of literature which builds upon and extends the biblical concepts. Good reasons exist for this new interest. Social evils of racism, sexism, indifference to human life and the built-in structural bias against the poor, while not new, press in upon one more urgently at a time when the whole world has become a global village. Social injustices are being experienced more clearly and more widely for what they are.

This awareness comes about at the very time when a new understanding of mission and ministry is developing theologically as a result of the documents of Vatican II, notably *Lumen gentium*. In it the Church sees itself as a prophetic people, sharing in the prophetic function of Christ. This new aspect of ecclesiology envisions all believers as being energized by God's Spirit to share in the Church's ministries. Many of them are endeavouring to assume its tasks especially within what they understand as the Church's new relationship with the world. In solidarity with it they strive to change the unjust structures existing there, and they come up against unjust structures in the Church.

While it is true that the Church is the people of God, that the people are the Church, it is likewise true that the lives of people must be structured. As with all such human forms, structures created to serve the common good can take on a life of their own. When they cease to respond to, or even recognize, the experience, the needs and the existence of whole groups of people, then they rightly come under scrutiny—structures, for example, of ecclesial patriarchy which perpetuate the difficult and oppressive cultural conditions of women.

Religion can very easily sacralize unjust privileges, becoming as it were the handmaiden of the social order. Prophetic faith chal-

lenges this relationship for the sake of society's victims. The established social order would like all future truth to be simply the unquestioned continuation of the present truth. The spirit of prophecy, however, prefers to nourish a perception and an awareness contrary to that often found in the social order. The Spirit energizes the Church, whether weary or apathetic, to an awareness of God's newness.

Every prophetic voice is engaged in this task of energizing. Mary Ward's was one such voice. She did not energize by future-telling as such, nor did she engage in righteous indignation and abrasiveness for every cause, and there must have been many. She saw the need for many more opportunities for the education of women, especially those who were poor. Her perception was sharpened by the conviction that everyone, women and men, were created by God with an inviolable dignity. Given the education not at that time available to them, and given their rightful place, women would play an important role in both Church and State.

Clearly neither the established social order nor the institutional Church at that time, both of which prefer to give the impression that everything is all right, was ready for her. Nevertheless, with prophetic faith and surprising grace she set about to nourish an awareness that things were not as they should be, not as they were promised, and not as they must be, and will be, if God has his way of compassion and truth. It is almost amusing to read in the Bull of Suppression that her Institute was like 'a weed in a cornfield'. Her whole life bore testimony to her responsibility and love for the Church, the Church as the shape of our life together as the people of God. God who is the source of newness was the source of her energy. She trusted in him to such an extent that her strength was renewed in her very waiting. Her waiting was neither resigned nor passive. Since she saw that the initiative was God's, she set about her plan determinedly, year after year, energized by his Word. She understood what he meant when he said:

Remember not the former things,
nor consider things of old.
Behold I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?
(Isai 43, 18.19).

Today her companions are reflecting on this 'new thing', understanding it more clearly as a different manner of women's religious life, which it was. May they not be content, however, simply to look back in order to honour her. Today's insight will give them

a new awareness of their religious life as an alternative structure to patriarchy. They will honour Mary Ward today by looking long and hard at the vulnerability of their sisters, in the Third World, for example; these women are victimized as a consequence of their inferior social role in the patriarchal system. The fact is well documented in the global statistics prepared for the United Nations Decade of Women Conference being held at Nairobi this summer. It would be difficult to believe that it would not be these women who would claim the energy of Mary Ward's prophetic task were she here today.

The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops indicates an encouraging awareness of the true status of women in a document of recommendations offered on its behalf by Archbishop Vachon to the 1983 Synod of Bishops. The bishops recommend that:

in our country and in our Church women and men allow themselves to be confronted by the Spirit of God . . . to have our individual and collective attitudes and behaviour enlightened by the gospel. At the heart of the gospel the beatitudes will help us to identify even those aspects in our institutions which are unjust and demeaning.

The effective implementation of new bonds of equality between women and men in the Church is worthy of today's prophetic task. Those who will undertake it may take heart from the courage, wisdom and cheerfulness they find within Mary Ward's prophetic journey.