

MARY WARD: CHANGING CONCEPTS OF HOLINESS

By WALTER PRINCIPE

IN 1615, when she was thirty years old, Mary Ward made a retreat at St Omer before the feast of All Saints. In a letter written on the feast day itself she described to Fr Roger Lee S.J. an experience she had undergone during the last two days. She wished to describe it, she said, 'both for my better satisfaction and greater security', but she found it difficult to describe. She was strongly attracted to it, yet afraid to accept it on her own:

... the better I discern it, the less able I find myself to declare it. I seem to love it, and yet am afflicted in it, because I cannot choose but retain it, and yet dare not embrace it for truly good till it be approved.¹

Although this experience later came to be called 'the *vision* of the just soul', in this account Mary speaks not of a vision but of a *discernment* of something that had 'occurred in these two days'. These words point to an ongoing if not necessarily continuous enlightenment of her understanding over this period of time. Her description in this letter gives no indication that her insight was an imaginary vision or picture. Perhaps the visual portrayal of this experience in *The Painted Life* fostered the impression that Mary had received an imaginary vision—unless she herself gave more details to her sisters in conversation with them.²

What had Mary Ward discovered during this experience? It seemed to her to be:

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 any I can compare in likeness to it, yet it is not like the state of saints, whose holiness chiefly appears in that union with God, which maketh them out of themselves.

It is, she says, an 'estate' or 'state' of a person (later she speaks

read more at www.theway.org.uk

of a 'soul' but never of a 'just soul'). She does not call this state 'holiness'. Perhaps, as she says, it did not appear to her to be like the holiness she associated with saints, a holiness that 'chiefly' (she does not say 'exclusively') shows itself in ecstatic union with God. What she has discerned is something different. It is 'clear and perfect', but it is of this life—not, we may surmise, a beginning of heavenly rapture like the ecstasy of the great contemplative saints of the past, but something more concrete. How attractive she found this state is evident from her next words: 'I perceived then an apparent difference, and yet felt myself drawn to love and desire this estate, more than all those favours', that is, more than the favours given the saints who were united with God by being 'out of themselves'. As will become clear, Mary was attracted to this state because she saw its value for those engaged in the apostolate of the Institute, whose practical goals and apostolic way of life were becoming ever clearer both in her mind and in the pattern of life developing at St Omer.

Thus far in her letter Mary Ward has given no detailed description of the qualities of this state she has discerned. She has simply said it is 'clear and perfect' and unlike the holiness of the saints. In the next paragraph, however, she begins to describe its positive qualities as she seemed to see them not in her imagination, but in her understanding:

The felicity of this estate (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, but I think that was after, or upon some other occasion; howsoever that such a thing there was I am very certain.

The qualities she discovered in this clear and perfect estate were detachment or freedom from earthly things, a commitment to good works for every kind of persons aptly disposed for them and, linked with this apostolic work, a further freedom to refer all things to God.

It is easy to see why Mary Ward would be drawn, as she says, to love and desire this state. What she describes are the qualities of a person who would most perfectly serve in her Institute. Such a person would be one temperamentally disposed for and persevering in an active apostolate. She would nevertheless be free from the attachments that apostolic activity in the world might bring because she would also have the inner freedom to relate

everything to God. From Mary's description we see that it would be a misnomer to call such a person an 'active' as opposed to a 'contemplative' religious because someone like this would, while acting, refer all to God in a contemplative spirit. A year later, in fact, Mary was to refer to it as 'a mixed kind of life'.³

This harmony between involved activity and inner freedom from things while referring all to God suggested to Mary Ward another harmony, that of Adam and Eve before the fall:

I seemed in my understanding to see a soul thus composed, but far more fair than I can express it. It then occurred, and still continues in my mind, that those in Paradise, before the first fall, were in this estate.

The state of the first couple was described by theologians, and undoubtedly in sermons, instructions, catechisms and other writings that influenced Mary Ward, as a state of perfect harmony among all the powers, passions, and activities of the first parents, who lived actively and effortlessly in paradise because their minds and hearts were in harmony with God, to whom they referred all things. Only because of original sin, this teaching held, was their harmony disrupted and their descendants left in a state of disharmony. Mary Ward knew, however, that God's gracious love is the source of a healing, harmonizing effect in all who are open to receive it. Her own hope was that because God had given her an understanding and desire for such a state, he would help her to grow into it:

It seemed to me then, and that hope remains still, that Our Lord let me see it to invite me that way and because he would give me grace in time to arrive to such an estate, at least in some degree.

This harmonious state of the first parents was called by theologians 'original justice'.⁴ It was probably this traditional expression that set off in Mary's thoughts a number of things that, she says, 'often since occurred to my mind with a liking of them'. These things she liked she lists as 'that word justice, and those that in former times were called just persons'; her list continues with 'works of justice, done in innocence, and that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are'. To approach, under God's gracious call and help, the harmony and holiness of that original state of justice is for Mary Ward the reason why catholic teaching spoke of the favoured persons of ancient biblical times as 'just' or named works done with the innocence reminiscent of paradise as

'works of justice'. Did she also have in mind Adam and Eve's lack of self-consciousness about their nakedness, an attitude overcome by shame and a need to hide their nudity after their sin, when she links with justice the ideal 'that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are'? Whether or not this was so, for her in any case the just person stands in simplicity and purity of intention before the scrutiny of others, perfectly free of hypocrisy or deception.

The foundress then adds another thought that came to her at this time: 'I have moreover thought upon this occasion, that perhaps this course of ours would continue till the end of the world, because it came to that in which we first began'. By 'this course of ours' Mary Ward refers to the way of life of her Institute.⁵ She expresses the hope that her Institute's growth through grace towards the ideal estate would continue until the end of time. Then it would achieve a final restoration of the perfect harmony of the beginning of history ('because it came to that in which we first began'), the achievement at the end of 'a clear and perfect estate' like the original justice of paradise. In this way the end of history would correspond to its beginning. Here as elsewhere Mary Ward shows a remarkable conception of God's graciousness at work not only in individuals but within the whole movement of human history.

The next paragraph of Mary Ward's letter contains important considerations, and since it has been omitted from the text given by Chambers and from the extracts in *The mind and maxims*, it is reproduced in full here:

Once I found a questioning in myself why this state of justice, and virtue of sincerity should appear unto me so especially requisite as a ground of all those other virtues necessary to be exercised by those of this Institute, and it occurred that the Fathers of the Society, being men, wise and learned, they might by those their natural parts, perform the functions of this Institute without so special concurrence of God's grace, as might require their continual vigilance and care, in the practice of those above-said virtues, and therefore if anything should be in danger to decay amongst them, it might be this, as also that we, wanting that learning, judgment, and other parts that men have, yet being grounded in this, we should gain at God's hands true wisdom, and ability to perform all such other things as the perfection of this Institute exacteth of us.⁶

It should first be noted that in this text Mary Ward summarizes

what she had previously discerned by calling it 'a state of justice, and virtue of sincerity'. This is the first time she has used the word 'sincerity': the term quite clearly points to the quality she liked so much, 'that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are'. Why are these needed more for her sisters than for the fathers of the Society? To the jesuit Father Lee she explains, perhaps with a touch of both wit and irony, that the fathers, being men of wisdom and learning, perhaps need less 'continual vigilance and care' than her sisters do in practising justice and sincerity. Since the members of her Institute lack the type of education and the apostolic experience of the Jesuits as well as 'other parts that men have', the virtues she describes would, she trusts, lead her sisters to true wisdom and strength to do the works of the Institute—not as virtues naturally acquired but as gifts from God. Whether Mary Ward's depreciatory comments about women by comparison with men, or with the Jesuits in particular, were made consciously or unconsciously, she would, we shall see, emphatically revise some elements of this statement two years later.

Although in an earlier paragraph of the letter Mary Ward had remarked that 'several times since I began to write, I have found an extraordinary horror in myself, and with all a fear that you would see it all to be nought, and be much afflicted at it', she now reveals a growing confidence in the discernment she had obtained during her two days of reflection:

After both that day and the next, as my meditations further discovered the condition of this Institute, methought I better understood those particulars, one by one, practically, not confusedly, than before I had done . . .

Here Mary Ward is speaking about the 'particulars' or details of the life of her Institute. Although she does not specify them here, we know from elsewhere that they were to include the following: a search for perfection through apostolic works; community life without enclosure; elimination of distinctive religious habit; the power to dismiss unsuited persons; independence of subjection to a male religious superior.⁷ She is confident that she grasps the correctness of these new patterns of religious life better and more practically than formerly precisely because, as she now says, she sees more clearly their relation to the spiritual qualities her sisters are to seek. She explains this confidence by saying that these 'particulars' or details of religious life

led me severally to that first estate, as the fountain, and best disposition for a soul to be in that would perform all this well,

and from thence I could without labour return to them again, and discern with great clearness and solid tranquillity the excellency and convenience of them.

Here Mary Ward shows that she had come to understand a kind of harmonious correspondence, a sort of circular or reciprocal relation, between her concrete plans for the Institute and the spirituality its members should seek. The particular aims and organization of her community called for and led her to such a spirituality ('that first estate') and also found in it the guarantee ('the fountain, and best disposition') that her sisters would reach its goals; this concept of spirituality in turn enlightened and assured her that her ideas about her community and its particular aims and organization were correct.

This final expression of Mary Ward's confidence about the particulars of her Institute shows how important she found her new understanding of that estate or course to be. Without a spiritual ideal for her sisters' lives that corresponded with its organization and aims, she could not be sure of that organization and its goals. What had been clarified for her in this retreat? It was her concept of holiness. She was attracted by this new insight but was afraid to accept it without Father Lee's corroboration. Why? Because her concept of holiness had until then been the holiness of the great contemplative saints, often rapt out of themselves in ecstatic union with God. With such an idea of holiness, how could she establish a community that would lead her sisters to holiness if their daily lives in the midst of activity gave less time or structure for continuous contemplation than did the cloistered life of existing orders? Yet, as she says in her closing remarks, she knows she must be good to do the good works of the way of life she thinks she is called to follow:

... I end with desires to be good, which I see I am not, and without that, it seems impossible I should be able to do good, at least according to the estate of life whereunto I think I am called.

Now, although she still avoids using the word 'holiness' about it, she describes her conviction about the value of 'a certain clear and perfect state, to be had in this life', one well suited for those doing the work of her Institute. She has a new concept of holiness comprising inner freedom within an active involvement in apostolic works, a freedom that unites activity with the pursuit of union with God because it helps each sister relate herself and her

activity to God. Here there is no dichotomy between action and contemplation, no fear that apostolic activity will draw the sisters away from God. Holiness will be achieved not by withdrawal from what one is doing but by going through the activity itself to find God within it and as its goal. (We can hear echoes of this theme later in Teilhard de Chardin's *Divine milieu*, and her thought gives practical application to a fundamental principle of Thomas Aquinas's spirituality.⁸) Such an ideal seeks the harmony not of the enclosed contemplative nun but rather that of the freedom of the state of original justice, a state described by theologians as the first couple's acting in perfectly ordered relations with God, with each other, within themselves, and with their world—activity done in innocent lack of self-awareness, with complete 'sincerity' (in Mary's terms) and openness, without any falsehood, 'that we may be such as we appear and appear such as we are'.

Sincerity and lack of falsehood. A synonym for sincerity and an antonym of falsehood is truth, or, as Mary Ward calls it in a series of conferences giving further insight into her concept of holiness, 'verity'. When an important catholic layman, Mr Thomas Sackville, who had intervened at Rome on behalf of the Institute and its proposed way of life, spoke favourably of them in the presence of the jesuit Father Minister, the latter made a disparaging remark in reply that drew from Mary Ward three spirited conferences to her sisters, who were discouraged by his attitude. She is quite sharp in her opening remarks about him: 'Love verity. Who can love a lie, and all things are lies that are not as they are in deeds; or who can love a creature or a friend that is not as he seemeth to be'.⁹ She then recounts the reason for her indignation:

Mr Sackfield (*sic*) commending us and our course, and telling how much it was esteemed by men of judgment and amongst the Cardinals at Rome, Father Minister being by, answered, 'It is true whilst they are in their first fervour, but fervour will decay, and when all is done, they are but women!'¹⁰

Mary's rejoinder focuses on 'verity'. In this conference she closely links fervour with love of truth or verity, and loss of fervour with seeking after lies. Her remarkable grasp of the doctrine of grace comes to the fore:

Fervour is a will to do good, that is, a preventing grace of God, and a gift given gratis by God, which we could not merit. It is true fervour doth many times grow cold, but what is the cause? Is it because we are women? No, but because we are imperfect

women. There is no such difference between men and women. Therefore it is not because we are women, but, as I have said before, because we are imperfect women, and love not verity, but seek after lies.¹¹

Inherent in the Father Minister's snide remark is the age-old heresy, often identified as Pelagianism, holding that the source of moral-spiritual good and the root of differences in holiness are unaided human nature. In this case the Minister implies that a difference in fervour has its roots in the difference of male and female genders. Mary Ward goes to the heart of the question by pointing out that perseverance and fervour in seeking God's truth cannot be merited by natural effort or be owing to natural sexual differentiation. They are pure gifts from God. She continues:

Veritas Domini manet in aeternum—the verity of our Lord remaineth for ever. It is not *veritas hominum*, verity of men, not verity of women, but *veritas Domini*, and this verity women may have, as well as men. If we fail, it is for want of this verity, and not because we are women . . . Divers religious also, both men and women, have lost their fervour, because they have been unmindful of this preventing truth, which is a gift of God, and a sign of predestination, as you have often heard, I am sure I have, of those that are wiser than I.¹²

Verity, which Mary Ward here equates with 'preventing truth', that is, with God's own truth entering human lives before any human meriting, is not from us but from God. Men and women stand in equal poverty and need of God's preventing truth; men and women alike can lose it by neglecting such a gift. Although the foundress speaks humbly of others wiser than she, one would be hard put to improve on her statement of this profound truth of theology and indeed of all spirituality. It should also be noted that Mary's correction of the Father Minister's outlook modifies the views she had expressed earlier to Father Lee about the natural aptitudes of women by comparison with those of men; she would, of course, still admit that the greater education and experience of the Jesuits made for some differences in the work and life of the two groups.

In identifying verity or truth as, in the first instance, the verity or truth of God entering human lives to ensure perseverance in fervour provided it is not neglected, Mary Ward found, perhaps unwittingly, the original meaning of the hebrew word '*emet*' translated in the Vulgate as *veritas*. '*Emet* is, as she says so well of

verity, first of all an attribute of God; it is God's truth in the sense that God is true to himself and his promises. God is stable and reliable; God is faithful. 'When Yahweh passed before Moses, he proclaimed his name as "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and *faithfulness* ('emet)'" (Exod 34,6).

How important to Mary Ward was verity as faithfulness can be seen from further remarks about 'verity' in these conferences. At one point she is speaking about verity now as found in the lives of her sisters:

I beseech you all, for God's love, to love verity . . . This is verity, to do what we have to do well. Many think it nothing to do ordinary things. But for us it is. To do ordinary things well, to keep our constitutions, and all other things that be ordinary in every office or employment, whatsoever it be, to do it well, this is for us, and this by God's grace will maintain fervour.¹³

In this passage Mary Ward indicates that when God's verity (or faithfulness, we may say) enters fully into the lives of her sisters, they in turn will be true and faithful, persevering in their fervour in doing well what they have to do, including the most ordinary things. That is why she exhorts her sisters to 'love verity and truth'¹⁴ and to seek knowledge only 'for him that is verity, the other [knowledge for its own sake or for oneself alone] is a lie'.¹⁵ Her teaching exhortation on perseverance and truth or faithfulness echoes the words of Paul to the early Christians:

Jesus Christ . . . will keep you steady and without blame until the last day, the day of Our Lord Jesus Christ, because God by calling you has joined you to his Son, Jesus Christ, and God is faithful (1 Cor 1,7-9).

Is Mary Ward's insistence on 'verity' in these conferences linked with the themes of 'justice' and 'sincerity' that she had presented two years earlier to Father Lee? They may well have been linked in her subconscious by two psalm-verses she recited frequently, one saying to God '*Justitia* tua, *justitia* in aeternum, et *lex* tua *veritas*' (Ps 118,142), the other declaring that '*veritas* de terra orta est, et *justitia* de caelo prospexit' (Ps 84,12). In any event, the qualities of justice and the verity she looks for in human persons seem to be very much alike if not identical. Both justice and verity involve perseverance in good works and reference of all to God. Justice also involves sincerity, and this is a type of verity since for

Mary Ward not to love verity is to 'seek after lies': it would amount to not being as one appears and not appearing as one is.

We may wonder where Mary Ward found her earlier views of holiness which she now put aside in favour of her later new discernment of justice, freedom, sincerity, and verity, and where she derived these later themes from. With respect to her earlier views, she had thought that the saints' holiness consisted chiefly of 'that union with God which maketh them out of themselves'. In her earlier years in England, or in reading on the continent, she may have come to know the tradition of the english mystics, for example, the doctrine of *The cloud of unknowing* addressed to contemplatives, or the example and writings of Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton or Julian of Norwich. She had heard many details about cloistered religious life from Margaret Garret, a servant who had lived for some time in a convent.¹⁶ She may also have known something of the Charterhouse and its fidelity unto martyrdom under Henry VIII. In her early days at St Omer she was undoubtedly edified by accounts of St Clare and of the french reformer of the Poor Clares, St Colette, whose rule was followed in the first convent Mary entered. We know that one of her favourite saints was St Bernard, an author so eloquent about contemplation and ecstasy. We also know that Father Lee had her read the autobiography of St Teresa of Avila; he also advised her to study the carmelite reform in hopes that she might enter that order after she had left the convent for english exiles she had helped to found. Any or all of these together could have given her the first concept of holiness. Moreover, in the convent she helped found in her early days, she wanted the most perfect enclosure and the greatest austerity because, as she herself says, at that time she saw the whole of perfection in these:

And so I put on the habit with the others, continuing in the exact observance of that Rule until all were about to go to the other monastery to be clothed solemnly, which was a year or thereabouts. Which austerity and retirement were exceedingly to my content, and as far as I can remember nothing then could have disturbed me or given me cause of temptation, except to hear that there was some Order in the Church of God more austere and more secluded, in which two virtues I had, at least in theory, placed the whole of perfection.¹⁷

With such a view of 'the whole of perfection', she had to undergo a radical shift in concepts of holiness before she could see her new Institute's ideal as valid and conducive to sanctity.

What of her new concept of holiness? As with some of her other crucial spiritual experiences, Mary Ward's intuition of the new estate of human perfection seems to have come from the Holy Spirit's guiding her intellect to discern a truth about holiness that she had not formerly known. We need not think that all its elements were poured into her mind by the Spirit without previous preparation. As with the inspired prophets of Israel, the light of the Spirit probably called forth to her consciousness and integrated various concepts and ideas that would be fruitful for her particular moment and context in history. Thus, as has been suggested, her use of the term 'justice' likely came from catechetical or homiletic instruction she had received about the original justice of Adam and Eve. Again, a chapter in Scupoli's *Spiritual combat*, a book she read all her life and knew practically by heart, describes at great length the manner of regulating the external senses and moving, not away from but *through* sense objects and experiences to God, the source of all their beauty, goodness, sweetness, etc.¹⁸ This doctrine, perhaps combined with the ignatian theme of contemplation within activity, could well have been present in her mind. This may then have been linked by the gifts and light of the Holy Spirit with that state of freedom from earthly things together with freedom to refer all things to God which were part of her concept of holiness for her Institute. These and other elements may well, of course, have also been mentioned to her by Father Lee or other spiritual guides. But it was the combining of these elements of holiness in relation to the work opened to her by Providence that made her discernment in her retreat so new. This new insight was to be intensified two years later when, meeting disparagement of women's fervour, she probed the mystery of divine verity and the verity of her sisters' lives and applied them to another concrete situation of her personal salvation-history.¹⁹

Her personal salvation-history. We could call it by another name—her personal spirituality both as a *concept* of holiness or spirituality and also (and more importantly) as her *actually lived* holiness or spirituality.²⁰ A thorough study of her concept of holiness or spirituality would have to ask many questions to see how she answers them.²¹ In the texts we have seen thus far, for instance, we have found little reference to Jesus Christ or to entrance into his mysteries by faith and the sacraments of faith, especially by sharing his cross. But although the many sayings gathered in *The mind and maxims of Mary Ward* usually speak of God and rarely name Jesus Christ, some of them seem to mean Christ when 'God' is used, and several do speak explicitly of

taking Christ's yoke or cross and following him. One of them, for example, says: 'Whoever will serve God according to her state in this Institute must of necessity love the Cross, and be ready to suffer much for Christ's sake'.²² We also know from accounts of her life that she spent much time in prayer to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and that she had a great devotion to the name of Jesus: 'IHS' was always at the head of her letters, and in her spontaneous prayers and letters 'My Jesus' and 'Sweet Jesus' occur frequently.

Further, in presenting the 'Scheme of the Institute' (*Ratio Instituti*) to Pope Paul VI in 1616, she stated that 'we propose to follow a mixed kind of life, such a life as we hold Christ our Lord and Master, to have taught his disciples . . .', and she adds: 'Our end then is, to work constantly at the perfection of our own souls under the *Standard of the Cross*, both by the acquirement of all virtues, by abnegation of all self-will and by diligent extirpation of self-love'.²³ Moreover, the *Spiritual Exercises* frequently brought her into prolonged and intimate contact with Christ, eliciting on one occasion these resolutions:

To proceed, as Christ did, was the portion of grace I only desired for my part, and all the happiness I wished for in this life . . . Here I purposed ever after . . . to embrace with great affection, whatever might make me like unto Christ in life, and manners.²⁴

And, to return to her actually lived spirituality by contrast with her concept of spirituality, her whole life proved to be a constant sharing in the sufferings and even the persecutions of Christ.

Although this essay concentrates on Mary Ward's new concepts of holiness as developed between 1615 and 1617, some further developments in her spirituality in the years immediately following should be noted. The retreat text about conformity to Christ that has just been seen comes from the year 1618. After writing these lines, however, Mary felt some tension between her desire to imitate Christ and her new way of life. She says:

I was troubled and unquiet after, forth of some fears lest this imitation of our Saviour, which now I admire so much, would not agree with my election, and chosen course of life. I would have enjoyed them both. This fear hindered I fear the effect of my prayer for grace to follow the example of Christ.²⁵

Not long afterwards, perhaps at Christmas of 1618, this tension seems to have been overcome, at least according to the testimony of *The Painted Life*. It depicts and describes a repetition of Mary

Ward's earlier discernment of 1615 about the value of the state of justice, freedom, and sincerity. According to *The Painted Life's* inscription, Mary realized something she had not mentioned in her description of her earlier experience of 1615, that is, that 'this state leads to inherited justice and *conforms to Christ our Lord*, as to a most perfect model of all virtues'.²⁶ If this text represents Mary Ward's own account, it shows that she now understood her 'chosen course of life' not only *not* to be in conflict with imitation of Christ but in fact to be an excellent way of conformity to him.

Between the end of 1620 and February of 1621 Mary Ward prepared a third plan of her community (the *Institutum*) and presented it to roman authorities in early 1622.²⁷ In it she describes members of her Institute as those who wish

to serve under 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.²⁸

This statement undoubtedly reflects the influence of the *Formula Instituti*, the first plan of the Society of Jesus presented by St Ignatius Loyola to Pope Paul III in 1539, since Mary Ward's own document is based so much on this jesuit document that eighty-five per cent of her text derives from it.²⁹ But she could emphasize this christic ideal, already expressed to some degree in her second plan, with greater confidence because she now saw it as both in harmony with and completing her earlier discernment of the state of justice, freedom and sincerity.

The second plan of 1616, the *Ratio Instituti*, had stressed in the first place self-perfection and acquisition of virtues, but had then gone on to say:

Besides attending to our own perfection, we desire, in the second place, to devote ourselves with all diligence and prudent zeal to promote or procure the salvation of our neighbour, by means of the education of girls, or by any other means that are congruous to the times . . .³⁰

The third plan of 1620-1621, the *Institutum*, shifts the order of presentation. It lays stress first and generally throughout on the end of the Institute itself as strongly apostolic. It is to be '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 . . .' Further, it adds, 'the members of this

Institute . . . shall also undertake any other ministry of the word of God'.³¹ Mary Ward does not, however, neglect the personal life and holiness of her sisters who are to be so strongly dedicated to the apostolate. In the paragraph following the previous statements she says:

Let her who belongs to this Society take care, as long as she lives, first of all to keep God always before her eyes, and also the nature of this Institute which she has entered and which is, so to speak, a pathway to God. Next, let her strive with all her might to achieve this end set before her by God—each one, however, according to the particular degree of her own vocation.

Elsewhere the document, although mainly concerned with the organization of the Institute for apostolic purposes, alludes several times to personal holiness—clearly seen now as in harmony with apostolic activity and related to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit figures importantly in this statement concerning the personal life of the sisters:

Before those who wish to enter with us take this burden upon their shoulders, they should ponder long and seriously, as the Lord has counselled (Lk 14,30), whether they possess enough spiritual resources to complete this tower; that is, whether the Holy Spirit who moves them is offering them so much grace that with his help they may hope to bear the weight of this vocation. After they have enlisted through the inspiration of the Lord in the militia of Jesus Christ, they ought to be prompt in carrying out this obligation which is so great, being girded for battle day and night (Eph 6, 14; 1 Pet 1,13).

Elsewhere Mary Ward says that having the Institute closely linked to the Apostolic See will assure its members of 'a more certain direction from the Holy Spirit' and will mean that the community will be 'more closely united to God, receiving his grace with greater assurance'. Several other virtues are mentioned, and in each case Mary makes a close link between the apostolic concerns giving structures to the community and the virtues that would sanctify the members. For example, if great authority must be vested in the General Superior and her council for the sake of the Institute's apostolate, the General Superior must 'be ever mindful of the kindness, gentleness and charity of Christ, and of the exhortations of Peter and Paul, a norm which she and the above-mentioned council should keep constantly before their eyes'. Poverty

is linked in this document with the apostolate to the 'neighbour' but is also 'more gratifying' and 'purer' for the lives of the members:

We have learned from personal experience that a life removed as far as possible from all avarice and as like as possible to evangelical poverty, is more gratifying, purer and more helpful to our neighbour.

Undoubtedly for Mary Ward poverty that helps the neighbour does so first of all by helping the sisters to that personal detachment and freedom which for her were essential to the state of justice, freedom, sincerity, and verity she had spoken of earlier; thus freed and detached, they could better serve their neighbour as well as witness evangelical poverty.

Therefore this third plan, while emphasizing the apostolic goal of the Institute itself, achieves a deep inner harmony between the work of the Institute and the holiness its members should have and in which they should grow. This document, in fact, appears to bring to completion the development of Mary Ward's concept of holiness. She had first, somewhat hesitatingly, presented the possibility of such harmony between a state of holiness and apostolic ministry. Now she describes the apostolic goals and activity directly and forcefully, but throughout the document she shows in implicit and at times explicit confidence that her sisters could and would grow in holiness within this activity. The 'clear and perfect estate . . . needful for those that should well discharge the duties of this Institute',³² an 'estate' of justice, freedom, sincerity, and verity seen as conforming one to Christ, provided her with a solid background for the daring presentation of her third plan for a free and wide-ranging apostolic community of women.³³ It is worthwhile noting in this third plan Mary Ward's clear references to the Holy Spirit. In spirituality and elsewhere one often speaks of perceived needs, and leaves in silence important elements taken for granted. If Mary Ward seldom speaks of the Holy Spirit, it is not because the Holy Spirit played a small part in her spirituality, her actually lived spirituality. Indeed, what strikes one most in her developing understanding of holiness and in her life is the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit giving her new insights, leading her to decisive and creative decisions, and helping her to persevere in the face of enormous difficulties throughout her endeavours. Her freedom was that freedom of the children of God which is the fruit of the New Covenant in the Spirit. From the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit, received by her faithfully and courageously, came the

spirituality that was at once uniquely Mary Ward's and at the same time her gift to her community and indeed to many religious communities that were to follow her way.³⁴

Lessons for today

By her Spirit-inspired spirituality, Mary Ward distanced herself from a received concept of holiness that was, for some of her opponents, so domineering as to stifle any new ways of holiness or spirituality. Her new insights into holiness, together with her development of new patterns of religious life corresponding to them, can teach important truths today.

First, her discovery and application of new concepts of holiness remind us that no one view of holiness, no one practical application of gospel ideals can or should claim a privileged place or overriding dominance in the Church. The history of spiritualities and of religious associations reveals an amazing variety of charisms and gifts within the Church as Christians have tried to live the gospel in different times, places, and cultures. This variety of gifts and graces, Thomas Aquinas teaches, has its origin in God, who intends that these differences, harmoniously united, should beautify the Church and build up the perfection of the Body of Christ.³⁵

This variety in unity, which is by no means the same as uniformity, is one of the most important aspects of catholicity. Today this theme is also frequently expressed by another term, 'inculturation', which is being urged by many, at least theoretically. The principle is applied in the new Code of Canon Law to worship and spirituality:

Christ's faithful have the right to worship God according to the provisions of their own rite approved by the lawful Pastors of the Church; they also have the right to follow their own form of spiritual life, provided it is in accord with Church teaching (c 214).³⁶

Although these and other rights of Christians are enunciated theoretically in this section of the new Code and elsewhere, no corresponding statements of duties on the part of Church authorities are provided nor, in most cases, are institutions or procedures established to safeguard such rights. One may wonder if catholicity in spiritualities and true inculturation by way of corresponding new forms of religious and spiritual life are being and will be respected by members of the Church, especially by other religious, the clergy, or the hierarchy, or whether Mary Ward's experiences and trials will be repeated anew in our day.

Second, Mary Ward applied a new concept of holiness to a group of women engaged in original forms of apostolic work that were needed by the changed circumstances of the Church in her day. She thereby calls attention to the care required not to stifle the Spirit when in our day both religious and other lay people seek spiritualities often arising within new apostolic responses to contemporary needs. Mary Ward saw the need for freedom of movement and lack of distinctive habit in order to care for persecuted Catholics in England and for educating catholic girls and young women among the english refugees in northern Europe and then in many other parts of Europe. She outlined new ways of religious life that could meet these new situations and new missionary needs, ways however that harmonized with a personal and institutional search for union with God. Today, answering the call of the Second Vatican Council and the movement of the Spirit, many groups of religious and other lay people are trying to meet new missionary challenges and needs by modifying their way of life or by forming new patterns of life according to the gospel, and this in order to be free to respond to the demands of loving service within new forms of spirituality. Mary Ward's work was for a long time thwarted and impeded by those who feared her novelties; so also were similar initiatives by St Francis de Sales and St Angela Merici, both of whom (subsequently canonised!) had to accept cloisters for the visitation and ursuline communities they fostered. Repression of today's initiatives, with insistence on return to familiar old patterns—themselves often revolutionary in their first days—would most seriously impede the true missionary efforts of Christ's faithful.

Third, one of the most evident reasons for opposition to Mary Ward and her new ways of life and holiness was that she and her sisters were women. Her new ideas and plans disrupted received expectations and teachings about the role of women in religious life or in the Church in general. We have seen a little of her own strong reaction against those who belittled her plans because they thought them impossible for women. Yet she was in the vanguard of that phalanx of women religious who would vindicate a new form of mixed religious life for women in the following centuries—a phenomenon that we can now point to as one of the glories of the Church. But many women today, whether in religious life or not, must feel sympathy with Mary Ward and have reactions at least equally as strong as hers when they see their persons belittled and their initiatives thwarted by a still dominant male paternalism in the Church.

Finally, opposition to Mary Ward came not only from curial

officials in Rome but also from clergy and laity in England as well as on the continent. They had predetermined ideas about how religious women should live and work, and they refused and tried to prevent the changes she proposed. The already existing divisions among English Catholics exacerbated the issue: her undertaking provided one more occasion for opposed groups to differ. Some of these opponents put pressure on the popes (who were, however, generally favourable to Mary Ward); this they did either directly or by exerting influence on members of the Roman Curia, often through half-truths and outright lies. We may ask whether today similar divisions among Catholics are not inhibiting efforts at renewal that may be the work of the Spirit. And is this reactionary and underhand way of acting something entirely of the past? Perhaps prophetic persons like Mary Ward will always, like Jesus her model, have to suffer so that the authenticity of the prophetic spirit or movement may be tested and verified. But this hardly authenticates the role of those doing the testing and persecuting as an honourable vocation within the Church. Perhaps the words of Gamaliel to the Sanhedrin with reference to the early Christians might be a guide for such testing:

... Leave them alone and let them go. If this enterprise, this movement of theirs, is of human origin it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God you will not only be unable to destroy them, but you might find yourselves fighting against God (Acts 5, 38-39).

In the early 1950s, three great theologians, Henri (now Cardinal) de Lubac, S.J., M-D. Chenu, O.P., and Yves Congar, O.P. were forbidden by church authorities to teach publicly. At that time, as a graduate student in Paris, I was edified to see the three of them carry on their apostolate of research and writing despite this ban. One day, when I told Père Chenu that I wanted to do research on the theology of the Holy Spirit, he replied with his undaunted smile and impish manner: 'Ah, be careful! At Rome they are afraid of the Holy Spirit!' Perhaps the example of Mary Ward's life and suffering at the hands of church authorities and the laity, and the ultimate success of her new concept of holiness and religious life—thought so dangerous at the time—may lead everyone in the Church to be less afraid of and more open to the workings of the Holy Spirit leading us into all 'verity' and therefore into new ways of holiness.

NOTES

¹ Original destroyed. Transcription in Archives IBVM Nymphenburg. Text first published in Fridl: *Die Englische Tugendschule*, Part 1, Add.Litt. ad. no. 104. The letter is given, with one paragraph omitted and several variations in text and punctuation, in *The life of Mary Ward (1585-1645)* by Mary Catherine Elizabeth Chambers IBVM (= *Chambers* henceforth), ed. Henry James Coleridge S.J., 2 vols. (London, Burns and Oates, 1882) I, pp 346-47. *Chambers* is now available from University Microfilms International, catalogue number AG5-OP 13466. I should like to thank Sister Olga Warnke IBVM, and Sister Marion Norman IBVM for much valuable assistance both by their personal knowledge and by their loan of helpful materials.

² *The Painted Life*. A series of fifty paintings of the life of Mary Ward preserved in the Provincial House of the IBVM, Augsburg. The twenty-fifth picture has the following inscription 'God showed to Mary at St. Omer at the feast of All Saints, 1615, a just soul, in an unspeakable beauty, in which all the virtues appeared to be as in a tissue, through which it was not only alienated from all things earthly, perfectly stripped of itself, and wholly united to God, but it received also the true liberty of spirit, equanimity, heavenly wisdom, and capacity for all which the perfection of the Institute required'. Text from *Chambers* I, p 345. This is evidently an interpretation adding details not found in Mary's own words.

³ In the 'Scheme of the Institute', the *Ratio Instituti*, sent by Mary to Pope Paul V in 1616, she describes the aims and work of the Institute at great length (*Chambers* I, pp 376-84 for the English translation). In it she says: 'Wherefore, we propose to follow a mixed kind of life, such a life as we hold Christ our Lord and Master, to have taught His disciples . . .' (p 376).

⁴ See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q 100, art 1c, and I-II, q 82, arts 1-4. Closer to Mary's time is the long treatise by Robert Bellarmine, *De gratia generi humano in primo parente collata*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Fevre, vol 5 (Paris, Vivès, 1873), pp 169-207, in which he speaks 'de gratia animae, quae dicitur iustitia originalis' (ch 1, p 169) and describes Adam as 'primus homo iustitia originali, et habitu gratiae gratum facientis ornatus' (ch 2, p 170). It is rather surprising that several catechisms circulating among English Catholics in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century have very little if anything on original sin, and nothing at all on original justice.

⁵ Mary Ward uses 'course' in various phrases to mean her Institute and especially its way of life. See, for example, her notes on meditations she made in 1618 while in the Spiritual Exercises: 'Presented that perchance there was some great trouble to happen about the confirmation of our course, and with this I found a great and new love to the Institute, and a near embracing or union of affection with it'. Text from *Chambers* I, p 419.

⁶ It is uncertain whether the paragraph was omitted by the institute writer, Chambers, or by the Jesuit editor, Coleridge; the comparison with the Jesuits may have embarrassed one or the other.

⁷ These particulars are outlined and argued for in detail in the 'Scheme of the Institute' (*Ratio Instituti*) sent to Paul V in 1616, the year following this experience. Text in *Chambers*, I pp 375-84. The 1615 experience certainly confirmed Mary in her views, as her letter says, but she and her companions had already been living according to these details for several years.

⁸ See the present author's essay *Thomas Aquinas's spirituality*, The Etienne Gilson Series 7, (Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), pp 19-22.

⁹ Text in *Chambers* I, p 408.

¹⁰ See *Chambers* I p 410 for the remark, and pp 409-414 for large extracts from the three conferences.

¹¹ Text in *Chambers* I pp 408-9.

¹² Text *ibid.*, p 409.

¹³ Text *ibid.*, p 410.

¹⁴ Text *ibid.*, p 411.

¹⁵ Text *ibid.*, p 413. In these conferences 'verity' sometimes takes on other meanings besides those we have mentioned. For example, it can refer to the verity of truth of a particular statement, as when Mary says 'I would to God that all men understood this verity, that

women if they will be perfect, and if they would not make us believe we can do nothing, and that we are but women, we might do great matters' (text *ibid.*, p 410).

¹⁶ See *Chambers I*, pp 45-9.

¹⁷ Quoted from her autobiography by *Chambers I*, p 179.

¹⁸ It is ch 21 in the final version e.g. *The spiritual combat* (London, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1935). The work was first published in 1589 and afterwards was enlarged greatly by Scupoli himself. An English translation published between 1603 and 1610 is based on an earlier edition of the original; in it chapter 13 is the one referred to here. Mary said of this work that it 'was, so to speak, the best master and instructor that I have had in spiritual exercises for many years, and one perhaps of the greatest helps which until now I have had in the way of perfection' (text in *Chambers I*, p 53). It is uncertain whether Mary used the earlier shorter version or another edition; she could read several languages and so was not necessarily limited to the English edition.

¹⁹ Although Mary was strongly influenced by the model of the Jesuits and by their spirituality, she herself points out some differences in emphasis and speaks of her insight as quite new in relation to what she had seen or known before.

²⁰ For the various meanings of 'spirituality' see this author's essay 'Toward defining spirituality' *SR: Studies in religion/Sciences religieuses* 12, (1983), pp 127-141.

²¹ For a partial list of such questions see *ibid.*, p 138.

²² Text in *The mind and maxims of Mary Ward* (London, Burns and Oates, 1959), p 50. The text contains certain inaccuracies.

²³ Both texts are in *Chambers I*, p 376. In the second text, emphasis mine.

²⁴ Text from the retreat notes of April 1618, made during the Spiritual Exercises, IBVM Archives, Ascot, England.

²⁵ Text *ibid.*

²⁶ The full text gives: 'God showed visibly to Mary, when she was meditating in London upon the words, *Et vocabis nomen ejus Jesum*, a just soul endowed with great brilliance, giving her clearly to understand that all who live in the Institute conformably to their vocation will attain to a similar indescribable beauty of soul, because this state leads to inherited justice and conforms to Christ our Lord, as to a most perfect model of all virtues.' Text from *Chambers I*, 434.

²⁷ The text, together with a valuable introduction and analysis including the historical setting, is found in a privately circulated document 'Fourth Letter of Instruction: the Third Plan of the Institute' by Sister Immolata Wetter, IBVM (= *Wetter* henceforth) (Mimeographed copy, Rome: Institutum BMV, November 1970).

²⁸ Text in *Wetter*, p 19; the dates are given *ibid.*, pp 3 and 4, and the title *ibid.*, p 6.

²⁹ See *ibid.*, p 1.

³⁰ Text in *Chambers I*, pp 376-7.

³¹ *Institutum*, no 1; *Wetter*, p 19.

³² See the second text quoted above from the Letter to Fr. Roger Lee.

³³ How daring and perhaps how doomed to non-acceptance was Mary's plan can be seen from the excellent discussion in *Wetter* pp 9-13.

³⁴ On the connection between spirituality and the Holy Spirit see 'Toward defining spirituality' (cited above, note 20), pp 130-6.

³⁵ See *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q 112, art 4c.

³⁶ Statements about the value of variety within unity, and the need to preserve both, abound in the texts of the Second Vatican Council and are the source of this canon. See for example the following documents: *The Church*, no 39; *Liturgy*, no 37; *Ecumenism*, nos 4, 14-8; *Eastern Churches*, nos 5-6; *Missions*, no 9; *The Church today*, no 86.