JOURNEY INTO FREEDOM

By DEIRDRE ROFE

LIKE ALL INNOVATORS, Mary Ward provides us with a life which makes for fascinating reading. All the ingredients of a great adventure story are there: religious persecution in England, perilous journeys on sea and land, a new venture in religious life for women, challenge from within the group she founded, opposition from without, imprisonment as a heretic and finally death, with the english Civil War raging about her. With such a plot, the temptation is to focus on the externals and to overlook the inner journey which so closely reflected and interpreted these events to record another story, a journey into spiritual freedom. This spiritual freedom, 'the freedom to refer all to God', reveals Mary Ward's lively perception of the providence of God at work in all the events of her life. This fundamental belief shaped her understanding of people and events to such an extent that it was the natural starting point for any reflection. What her life reveals is a growing confidence in her capacity to discern the will of God, coupled with a contentment that such a reflection finally always brought her.

But this is to jump ahead of events. Mary Ward was born at Mulwith near Ripon in Yorkshire on 23 January 1585, to Marmaduke and Ursula Ward. Together with other families in the north who had remained loyal to the catholic cause, the Wards had become accustomed to the problems of being members of an outlawed religion. Practice was difficult since it was forbidden for the sacraments to be celebrated publicly. Home-based devotions and Mass said under cover by priests who were sheltered in secret by the host families provided the staple of their religious diet. Further inspiration came from the lives of family members and neighbours who were penalized for their faith, either through imprisonment as in the notorious 'Little Ease' in the Tower of London or by making the ultimate sacrifice and dying a painful martyr's death. Such examples were not lost on the impressionable Mary who spent some of her early life with her grandmother, Ursula Wright, a lady of profound faith and courage who had herself spent some years imprisoned in York. For the Catholics of the north, adherence to the faith was a conscious and weighty decision, which brought with it social and political outcomes, at

once disadvantageous and dangerous.

For Mary, brought up in such a milieu, commitment to the faith was a living, daily reality. 'The sadly afflicted state of England our native country' is a refrain repeated often in her writings and certainly provided the stimulus for the direction of her life's work. This direction was not immediately apparent. Urged by her parents to marry, to cement the catholic cause in the north, Mary remained strangely opposed. Several suitors were proposed but, in each case something intervened. By this stage (1600) she was staying with her cousins, the Babthorpes, at Osgodby in the East Riding, a family for whom she had great affection. They, in turn, provided that model of a christian home where the faith was at the heart of its life. Of Lady Grace Babthorpe, Mary commented:

> She was of more than ordinary virtue and all things in her house so well ordered for the service of God, as led me by degrees to begin to serve him.

Yet this model of the christian wife and mother was to have a different impact from what one might immediately suppose. Mary Ward's path was not to follow Lady Babthorpe but rather to set such an ideal before the students in her first schools. Her way became clear in prayer:

> 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 I had the least thought of embracing a contrary state ..... God himself took the matter in hand and freed me.

This conviction, while inwardly freeing, did not make the achievement of her dream any easier. If girls wished to become religious in the England of the early seventeenth century, it meant they had to journey to the Continent and join an established order there. Many had done so; in fact there were convents of english Benedictines and Canonesses of St Augustine already in existence in the Netherlands. But Mary's family was opposed to the idea and her relatives doubled their efforts to find a suitable marriage partner. Edmund Neville, a nobleman and Catholic, seemed the ideal choice. Her confessor joined the ranks of those urging her to marry, for the sake of the faith. It is worth pausing at this point to contemplate Mary's response. Torn between loyalty to her family and fidelity to the certainty of her religious vocation, she turned to God for guidance. Let her say what happened:

> Being in some distress for this reason, there occurred to my mind that sentence: *Quaerite primum regnum Dei.* Seek ye first the Kingdom of God etc., when suddenly the burden was raised from off me and I had, as one may say, a certainty, that if I did my part in embracing the better portion, and preferring before all the honour and service of God, his divine goodness would supply for every deficiency of mine.

This short extract reveals how Mary faced a dilemma. She would place it before God, await his inspiration and with peace of mind be led to a decision which had as its lodestar, 'the honour and service of God'. The ignatian influence is clearly evident here in the harmony between reasoned application and attentiveness to the 'better' for the sake of 'the honour and service of God'. Such an attitude also characterized her handling of excessive penances, a practice in which she indulged for a time. She came to see that 'these things are not of obligation but of devotion and God is not pleased with certain acts made thus by constraint, and to acquire one's own quiet, therefore I will do these things with love and freedom, or leave them alone'. It is from experiences such as these that Mary Ward came to define freedom as one of the key characteristics of her followers—that freedom of spirit 'to refer all to God'.

God, indeed, did his part and the opposition to her leaving England to join a religious order abroad was lifted. Elated, she set sail for Europe, with St Omer, in the province of Artois, as her destination. There was an english college of the Society of Jesus in the town and she hoped to receive guidance from one of the Fathers there in order to grow in spiritual freedom.

Now begins a period of what, from the outside, looks like disaster. Advised to join the Poor Clares as an out-sister, Mary Ward had to struggle with a strong resistance to such a course. Her spirit sought the contemplative but, accepting this spiritual direction as the will of God, she joined the french convent in St Omer and set to begging, buying provisions and attending to all the practical aspects associated with a convent. Her own disquiet was confirmed by revised spiritual advice and after nearly twelve months she left that convent. Since her desire was to lead a contemplative life and in that way to respond to her 'unspeakable zeal for the good of England' Mary determined to set up a monastery for english Poor Clares at Gravelines. This project took her twenty months to accomplish but finally the monastery was built and she joined the new community towards the end of 1608. At last, it seemed, she had achieved her goal, as she entered upon

a life of quiet and contemplation. But stirrings of an unwelcome nature disturbed her peace. The disquiet 'appeared wholly divine' and left her powerless before a new call, to do:

> what pleased him more. Here it was shown to me that I was not to be of the Order of St Clare; some other thing I was to do, what or of what nature, I did not see, nor could guess, only that it was to be a good thing and what God willed.

So, within less than a year of her establishing the english Poor Clares, she left to face an unseen future. The townspeople were quick to taunt her with 'runaway nun' but Mary Ward's peace drew on a deep source: 'the pain was great but very endurable, because he who laid the burden, also carried it'.

Returning to England in 1611 Mary Ward resumed the life of a catholic laywoman living 'as became her both in matter and manners'. The experience with the Poor Clares was far from wasted in that she realized now her total dependence on God for the next move. While dressing her hair one morning before the mirror, Mary received the first of three singular insights. She understood that she was not to join the Order of St Teresa but to do 'some other thing .... without all comparison more to the glory of God'. So intense was the experience that she was held 'for a good space without feeling or hearing anything, but the sound glory, glory, glory'. The 'Glory Vision', as it is known, stands as one of the key insights into her future mission, bringing with it 'clearness and certainty'. This conviction, combined with her personal charm and clear determination to do something for the Catholics of England, must have been inspiring, for at this point she is joined by seven young women, all moved by the same desire to help their afflicted country. The first companions, like Mary Ward, came from a similar recusant background. They were Jane Browne, Catherine Smith, Mary Poyntz, Winefrid Wigmore, Susannah Rookward, Barbara Babthorpe and Mary's sister, Barbara Ward. One of the most appealing pictures in the *Painted Life* of Mary Ward (a late seventeenth century series of fifty oil paintings depicting scenes from her life) shows them setting sail for St Omer in a tiny boat, to cross the Channel.

The small group had two objectives—the first was to live as a religious community practising poverty and other penances in the hope of perceiving more clearly the path ahead. The second was to open a school for english boarders and also one for the children of the town, in the firm belief that 'Woman is, even as man is, a reasonable creature and hath a flexible witte, both to good and

eville, which with use and counsell may be altered and turned' (Juan Luis Vives). They received the patronage and friendship of the Archduchess Isabella, and the local bishop, Blaise, became a staunch supporter and defender. Such support was necessary as Mary Ward embarked on what was to become her life task—approbation of her Institute by Rome as a validly constituted religious order in the Church. This task was also to become her cross.

To understand the opposition she encountered, it is necessary to recall the position of women, in particular women religious, in the Church and society. Although in the seventeenth century and earlier there is some small precedent, particularly in England, for the practice of providing a balanced education for girls, the general impression is that, at that time, 'one half of the human race is neglected'. Women were looked upon as ornaments in the home, necessary for childbearing and rearing, but it was the rare woman who could equal her husband in learning and managerial skills. Religious women pursued their vocation in the contemplative cloister away from the distractions and temptations of the world.

In a spirited reaction to a Jesuit who dismissed their efforts in St Omer because, when all is said and done 'they are but women', Mary Ward declared 'There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things .... And I hope in God it will be seen that women in time to come will do much'. With this attitude to women's potential in general, it is no surprise to find that her plan for the women who followed her departed sharply from the convention then operating. Still uncertain of what direction to follow in terms of a rule of life, Mary Ward waited upon God. The lead came in 1611, as she lay recovering from a serious illness:

> Being alone in some extraordinary respose 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.

In a later comment to Fr John Gerard, Mary was to say, 'These are the words whose worth cannot be valued, nor the good they contain too dearly bought'. As with many of her central insights, while they brought inner peace and certainty to Mary, that did not necessarily mean that the path ahead was cleared. In fact, while her spiritual insights confirmed her in the basic thrust of her mission, all too often they brought her into a more radical

confrontation with herself and with church authorities. Her journey into freedom was accomplished in a paradoxical fashion.

This is nowhere more evident than in this second insight, to 'take the same of the Society'. The plan of the Institute which emerged from this bore the direct influence of Ignatius, in that Mary Ward took the jesuit *Formula,* adapted it to a feminine mode and presented it to Gregory XV in 1621 as the most complete statement of her intention. Such a move was radical on several counts. It confirmed the chief elements of her earlier plan of 1615, presented to Paul V which sought (a) to follow a mixed life of contemplation and apostolic activity 'by means of the education of girls or by any other means that are congruous to the times'; (b) to be subject to the pope alone and not to the jurisdiction of any male religious order; (c) to dispense with enclosure in order to pursue the apostolic work of the Institute; (d) to be characterized by no habit but rather to wear the dress of the time, and (e) to be allowed to dismiss persons from the Institute even after profession, for grave reasons. (This power is to be exercised by the Chief Superior.) Such proposals, taken together, were unheard of. In the 1621 plan, she aligned herself and her Institute very closely with the jesuit model. In doing so she attracted considerable attention, much of it undesirable. The feud between the Jesuits and the secular clergy in England was bitter and unyielding. Mary Ward's work in England was already under suspicion, but this constitutional alignment provoked the english secular clergy to speak out. They dismissed 'these Jesuitesses' as vain, frivolous and mischief-making. Among the Jesuits themselves, opinion was divided; many probably recalled Ignatius's caution about women adherents, while others were impressed by their religious lives and fine work in educating girls.

Mary Ward's conviction about the rightness of the path she was taking was grounded in a developing understanding of the spirit of the Institute. Although troubled by temptations to pride, she nevertheless freely and confidently described the qualities necessary in a member of the Institute. In the third of her key insights, she defines freedom, justice and sincerity as the distinguishing marks of her members. Known as 'the Just Soul vision', this profile is a rich source for anyone attempting to understand Mary Ward and her mission. Freedom, in this context, is a state of mind and heart—a freedom from 'all that would make one adhere to earthly things' so that open-handed, one is freed to attend to God, 'to refer all to God'. Justice is the outcome of a life lived in close relationship with God. Right deeds will emerge from a right ordering of one's life, while sincerity highlights one of Mary

Ward's soundest instincts 'to do ordinary things well'. One might say that by 1615 Mary Ward realized what her mission was—she knew the end of the Institute was to be the glory of God, the structure and work were to be modelled on the Society of Jesus and the spirit particular to the members of the Institute had been defined in her description of the Just Soul.

Undoubtedly the strength of these convictions was to be the source of her future inspiration and consolation when the troubles she anticipated in 1618 began to mount. Initially, however, her ventures prospered. Under the patronage of Ferdinand, Prince Bishop of Liège, foundations were made at Liège and later at Cologne and Trèves. As her work flourished, the question of official papal approbation became more urgent. The Plan of the Institute (*Institutum I*) of 1621 is Mary Ward's most complete statement of her intentions. She decided to present it personally to Gregory XV and while the reception was courteous, it was also cautious. She took a calculated gamble that the high favour currently enjoyed by the Jesuits would assist her cause. But she had not realized the implacable attitudes of the english secular clergy to the Jesuits and hence to the 'Jesuitesses'. Her cause, although presented personally, was doomed to a stormy passage. In an attempt to convince by deeds as well as words, Mary Ward sought permission to open schools in Italy. Foundations in Rome, Perugia and Naples were quickly established and flourished. Further foundations were made in Vienna, Munich and Pressburg under the patronage of the local prince or bishop. The parents were satisfied, even the Jesuits were impressed, as one of them wrote: 'They are of singular virtue, integrity and industry, and it is incredible what fruit they produce in the Church by perfectly instructing young girls in piety'. The immense vitality of this period, reflected in the destructive efforts of officialdom and her enemies and the establishment of new foundations on the part of the Institute, made the final confrontation so much more dramatic.

All this was not enough to secure confirmation of their way of life. In fact, Mary Ward detected active opposition from the cardinals of the Sacred Congregation for Bishops and Religious. Writing to Winefrid Wigmore, Mary observed 'The cardinals mean to do the worst they can do, who can do no more than God will suffer them'. The unshakeable belief that God was in all that happened or would happen remains Mary Ward's anchor as the sea of opposition in official circles mounted. Even before she presented her final memorial to Urban VIII in 1629, the order for suppression had been sent from Rome to the nuncios of Flanders and Germany. This journey to Rome from Munich undertaken

in winter was a hard trial for Mary Ward, afflicted with poor health and a growing anxiety over the fate of her communities.

The 1629 Memorial to Urban VIII is a powerful document, which focuses on the development of the Institute. The tone is spirited and at times polemic, but it is marked by a tender affection and concern for those who had followed her. Although Mary Ward could point to significant achievements, particularly in Germany, and could claim support from powerful sources, the weight of opposition and the lack of precedent told against her. She paid the penalty of many innovators and saw her life's work demolished. The papal Bull *Pastoralis Romani Pontificis* formally suppressed the entire Institute. Orders for the arrest of Mary Ward as a 'heretic, schismatic and rebel to the Holy Church' were issued and in 1631 Mary Ward was taken to the Anger convent of the Poor Clares in Munich. Her lodgings were meagre and infected with disease; she was deprived of the sacraments for nine weeks yet she could still say 'Our Lord and Master is also Our Father and gives no more than ladylike and what is most easy to be borne'. Her calm resignation to this period of trial—'If God would have me die, I would not live, it is but to pay the rent a little before the day'—is coupled with a firm determination not merely to suffer but to labour for her cause: 'in her mind grew a strong force and threat .... to labour in defence of her own and hers their innocency, and consequently her own delivery'. Thus anything which would compromise her cause was rejected even if it meant dying without the sacraments. The anguish of this time in prison, deprived of friends, sacramental support and understanding, can only be imagined, but Mary continued to affirm that 'we serve a good master'.

On her release from the Anger convent, 'my palace, not a prison', Mary Ward journeyed to Rome where she was welcomed and given sanctuary by Urban VIII. From the shattered ruins of her Institute Mary gathered a few members to form a community on the Esquiline. Despite the exemplary nature of their life, they were still under scrutiny from the opposition. Faced with this fact her letters reveal her unswerving faith in God, together with a healthy concern for the practicalities of life, especially where they concerned her companions. Poverty attended them at every step and the need for funds was an ever-present reality. She believed that God would provide and somehow he always did! But her health was failing. Believing that a trip to Spa would give her new strength, Mary Ward left Rome in 1637, never to return.

The australian poet, A.D. Hope in his poem 'The death of the bird' speaks of the last journey:

> For every bird there is this last migration:
> Once more the cooling year kindles her heart;
> With a warm passage to the summer station
> Love pricks the course in lights across the chart.

It is no surprise that Mary Ward's last journey should be towards England. Although she had not been on english soil for twenty years, she had kept in close contact with members of the Institute on mission there. (The english situation had continued to provide the inspiration for her dream of apostolic religious women.) The England which welcomed her in 1639 was a much calmer scene than the one she had left in 1619. Queen Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I, practised her religion openly along with some of her court. Mary Ward and her companions gladly took advantage of this freedom and set about planning for schools in the City of London. Equipped by birth and manners to fit in with the royal circle, they soon found themselves entrusted with the education of the daughters of the rich and powerful. As was always her practice, she opened her doors to the poor in the belief that education was an advantage not a danger. It was said of her that 'She was a great enemy of ignorance and did not love to see people of little mean spirits'. Three years of relative calm came to an end when the royal family left London as the threat of civil war came closer. Mary Ward determined to move to the north, to take up residence in Yorkshire. As the dangers from the Civil War increased, she moved into York itself for greater safety. Amid the cannons and grenades, Mary Ward preserved a remarkable serenity which made her a haven of peace and comfort to all who visited.

> She .... so much lady and mistress of herself and (of her) suffering, as to give life and courage not only to her own family, but to all sorts of persons that came to visit her. Many would say they came to her as dead and lost, with her revived, and went away with courage. Nor did she this in a severe saintly way but with such a human manner.

Clearly she lived out her own maxim—to do the ordinary, human thing well, no matter what the surroundings.

Once York surrendered to parliamentary forces, Mary and her companions returned to Hewarth. Her health was failing fast yet she retained a keen interest in the people around her, longing, in particular, for news of those of hers still on the Continent. It was not forthcoming. As death drew closer, she called to her those who had remained faithful, urging them to cherish the vocation they

had received from God: 'Let it be constant, efficacious and *loving*'. She stressed the last word. This quality would be tested as the resurrected Institute struggled to re-group in the face of opposition and misunderstanding. Enemies were, for Mary Ward, a sure road to her heavenly home, Jerusalem. That home welcomed her on 30 January 1645 when she died, surrounded by her friends in the Lord. Thanks to the kindness of the Vicar of Osbaldwick, 'honest enough to be bribed', Mary Ward was buried at the small church there. Her gravestone now occupies pride of place in the entrance to the church.

From the perspective of the twentieth century, Mary Ward emerges as an intelligent woman of her own time, aware that the religious revolution effected by the Reformation demanded a new response. The initial struggle within herself as she searched for her place in God's order of things was the most significant. Once that uncertainty had been removed, she responded with unswerving fidelity to the three major insights which gave direction, purpose and spirit to her work. Her interior freedom before God remained the cornerstone of her life. Subsequent troubles—the challenge to her authority, the opposition from powerful ecclesiastics, the poverty of some of her foundations, her own ill-health—were all viewed by her in terms of her unshakeable confidence in the providence of God, her 'good Master'. If God were her Master, then she was his joyful servant even in the midst of oppression. From prison she wrote 'Be merry and doubt not our Master'.

We are fortunate to have a variety of sources for Mary Ward's life and work. Her own writings range from formal memorials to the papacy to letters crowded with domestic concerns. There are retreat notes and resolutions and long letters to powerful friends. The testimony of her closest associates, Winefrid Wigmore and Mary Poyntz known as the *Briefe Relation,* is a particularly valuable source, including, as it does, many anecdotes and homely details of this engaging lady. Finally we have a selection of biographical and autobiographical fragments, the most complete being the series of fifty oil paintings depicting important moments in her life.

What emerges from these sources is a woman who, in championing the rights of women, located their importance in their humanity, as creatures of a good God. Her personal faith was profound, yet she moved gently with those whose faith was weak and troubled. All types of people responded to her courteous, lively personality seeing in her something of the freedom promised to the children of God. Perhaps her greatest contribution to the spirituality of the Church is this very quality—that trust in the providence of God which liberates one to love God, to love others and to love life with 'a cheerful mind'.