

TAKING THE SAME . . .

By LAVINIA BYRNE

WE THOUGHT THAT 'taking the same' would be an event. It has turned out to be a process. And so, like every process, its beginnings are hazy; we live in the midst of it; its ending lies somewhere in an unknown future. Even for Mary Ward who, in the year 1611, heard so clearly the words 'Take the same of the Society', the pattern was somehow comparable. Indeed by examining that pattern and by looking at what has happened for one particular religious congregation which has adopted the Ignatian *Constitutions*, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I believe that certain other observations can be made which have a more general application. These are about the extent to which taking involves jettisoning what one already has; about the self-identity of the group that does the taking; about precisely what it is that one takes—and what it is that one leaves aside. Above all they are about the tool we may use to do this taking and its application to all our Christian living.

Mary Ward's experience

In a letter to the Apostolic Nuncio of Lower Germany, Monsignore Albergati, Mary Ward elaborated her understanding: 'We were to take the same both in matter and manner, that only excepted which God by diversity of sex has prohibited'. This sentence has a history. Mary Ward did not hear the words 'Take the same' totally out of the blue. She was a young Yorkshire woman who had already left her country twice in order, initially, to enter the Poor Clare's at St Omer and later with a group of companions from England to embark upon a more 'mixed form of life'. Ignatian influences underpinned her entire venture. Her grandmother had first made the Spiritual Exercises while in prison in York gaol; Fr Holtby S.J. was a family friend; her first contact in St Omer was at the Jesuit College there; she made the full Exercises with Fr Roger Lee S.J. in 1608 while setting up a Poor Clare foundation at Gravelines. By this date there were over 10,000 members of the Society of Jesus, with some 260 colleges in Europe

alone. In such a small community as the English Roman Catholic one this inevitably meant that people both knew each other and that they influenced each other. Ignatian spirituality was not some abstract concept; it was a way of looking at the world that readily had human features in the faces of known and named friends.

This way of looking at the world or living in the world had already begun to exercise its attraction on Mary Ward and her companions before they set off to make their first foundation at St Omer. Initially they were prepared to wait to know how to give an organizational framework to whatever it was they were attempting to do. They were unenclosed women, living together, praying, sharing and seeking God's will. This was revealed in somewhat dramatic fashion when Mary Ward heard the words that made her resolve to 'take the same'. Later her comment was, 'My confessor resisted; all the Society opposed'. The story is a fascinating one but this is not the place to tell it. Here it would seem more appropriate to single out certain characteristics of those first attempts at taking; to ask what was taken and why; to notice what the snares were and what the illusions; to observe the relationship between Mary Ward's own self-understanding and the way of proceeding she sought to adopt.

The 'same . . . both in matter and manner'. Both the 'what' and the 'how' of Ignatian spirituality are somehow contained in the *Constitutions*. A text such as *Const* [101]¹ is born from the deepest insights of the Exercises. It emerges from a Second Week call that is purified in the Third Week and finds its focus in the life of the Contemplatio. Yet where the Exercises concentrate more on the 'what' or matter, the *Constitutions* provide a manner or 'how', a way of living out of these deep understandings. For this reason Mary Ward was anxious that her companions should live by these *Constitutions* even while her view of priesthood was such that women could not readily make much use of the texts which envisaged formation for ordained ministry. She too had a context and this necessarily circumscribed her understanding.

Indeed at times it led her to mistake the practice for the spirit. On the one hand we are told that she was criticized for being 'worse than seven Jesuits' and this presupposes a degree of internalization. Similarly her companions were castigated as 'it sometimes happens that they are together with men alone; they even associate with bad characters'. Hardly a happy criticism when most of their friends were Jesuits . . . Yet over and above this we discover a

certain kind of fundamentalism—that they sought to be called the Society of Jesus, to wear some kind of gown and, at times, that they aped what they found.

A third pattern is apparent too. Within one year of hearing those words about taking the same, Mary Ward had produced her own first plan for her nascent institute, the *Schola Beatae Mariae* of 1612. Two further plans followed, of which the most significant is the *Third Plan* of 1620. By the time she came to draw up this document the balance was redressed. Instead of a feverish search to imitate, there is a stronger sense of personal purpose and notably of the specific contribution that women can make to the life and ministry of the Church. The crucible in which this particular understanding was fired may well have been the experience of November 1617 when a disparaging comment from the minister of the Jesuit College in St Omer drew forth new and prophetic words which a younger Mary Ward would not have thought to utter.

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 . . . For what think you of this word 'but women' as if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man! Which I dare to be bold to say is a lie; and with respect to the good Father may say it is an error.

I would to God that all men understood this verity, that women, if they will, may be perfect, and if they would not make us believe that we can do nothing, and that we are but women, we might do great matters.²

This takes the debate far beyond questions of complementarity and the hierarchical thinking they can conceal. In the text of the *Third Plan* Mary Ward was prepared to spell out the consequences of her understanding. Each of her companions was,

to strive for the defence and propagation of the faith and for the progress of souls in Christian life and doctrine. She will do this by leading them back from heresy and evil ways to the faith, to a Christian manner of life and to special obedience to the Holy See, assembling the people and preparing them to attend public sermons and lectures. She will also do this by performing *any service of the word of God* . . . Furthermore she will labour for the spiritual consolation of the faithful . . .³

The text then specifies ways in which this may be done. Its interest, however, lies in the fact that equal weight is here given both to her own insights and to the *Formula Instituti Societatis Jesu*. Hence I assume, the puzzling reference in the 'But women' speech cited above.

To do ordinary things well, *to keep our constitutions*, and all other things that be ordinary in every office and employment, whatsoever it be . . . this by God's grace will maintain fervour.⁴

Beyond the Ignatian text there is another text. The self-identity of the group is assured only when the two are kept in harmony. This text may be a written one, hence the *Third Plan*. On another level however, it cannot be written—because constitutions in any case represent something 'the Spirit writes and imprints upon the heart'.⁵ Hence the importance of the Painted Life of Mary Ward, a series of 55 paintings preserved in the third oldest house of the Institute in Augsburg. Pictorially they relate the same script. I now understand why an old rule book stored in the archives of the Bar Convent in York rang so many bells in my memory when I first read it in the 1970s. The eighteenth-century text preserves insights from the original myth or self-understanding out of which Mary Ward and her first companions lived. It relates the same *institutum* or pathway to God. The text may be quaint, the degree of personal care and interest is not.

In such things that appertain to diet, clothing, lodging and other necessities, let her take care that although they be such as are fit to make her subjects exercise their virtue and self-abnegation, nevertheless there is nothing to be wanting that nature require for its conservation, still with regard in our Lord to the difference of persons.

[With regard to the sick] she must study withal to delight them as they lie, with little green boughs or the like.⁶

I like to think a notebook which contains recipes treasured by Mistress Martha Hansom, the IBVM cook at the Bar Convent from 1791–1839, is carrying the same script. For those who like ironies of history, I should add that she was the aunt of Joseph Aloysius Hansom who went on to become the architect of St Beuno's, the Jesuit college in north Wales. Here is one of her preparations:

Receipt for the King's evil

Take a large piece of sponge and hold it in a clear charcole fire and as it burns to a cole break it off till all is burnt then pound and sift it to a fine powder and give as much of it as will lye upon a shilling morning and evening in milk and let ye person fast 2 hours after it. It is best to begin it at ye new moon and continue it till ye full, and rest three days then take it again. So do three times spring and fall.

The King's evil, so called because it was thought even in the pre-Christian era that the King's touch could cure it, is known to us today as scrofula, a tubercular swelling of the lymphatic glands. Many legends surround the history of the disease. The practice of touching for the King's evil was especially dear to the Stuarts and Charles I no doubt touched during his stay in York at the time of the Civil War. Charles II touched 92,107 people between 1660 and 1682. The ritual survived until the reign of Queen Anne who performed it on 200 people in 1712. Amongst them was the young Samuel Johnson, aged two and a half at the time.⁷ While I doubt that many of the community or ninety children educated in the school at the Bar were affected with the King's evil, I am nevertheless reminded by this recipe that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the community there had to make their own way and husband their own resources in comparative isolation and according to their own lights.

The Hansom connection is of course more than an irony, it is indicative of a pattern and once again a reminder that what is in question is the story of a group of people and how they inter-relate, not simply a text, whatever its manifestations. The myth by which they live is more important than any of these manifestations, whether they be constitutions, paintings, rule books or recipe books. And the patterns by which this myth is preserved and given new form are most important of all.

In Mary Ward's experience and in the experience of the historical people who were her first companions and her later companions this pattern seems to be as follows. The spirituality of a specific group, the Jesuits she knew, both attracted her and informed her initial inspiration. Subsequently this attraction was confirmed in an identifiable context, that of the words she heard about 'taking the same'. Further work had to be done, however, both on the taking and on understanding what 'the same' might possibly be. Mistakes were made when this was understood too literally as

meaning only the Ignatian *Constitutions*. As she discovered her own voice in a context of conflict, she also became clearer about the place of what she already had, the value of her own contribution to this dialogue. She learnt to discern.

The IBVM experience

My own copy of the *IBVM Constitutions* is dated 1979. For 350 years Mary Ward's Institute had to do without the seminal text she understood God to wish her to adopt. In our own taking I recognize many of the elements I have described from her story: the preparation and groundwork represented by years of faithful practice, notably of the annual Ignatian retreat. Friendship with named Jesuits who gave both the *Constitutions* and the *Exercises* a human face. The call issued by the second Vatican Council, that we should return to our sources and so begin to take more seriously the seed bed out of which we grew. The same tendency to confuse the text for the spirit and to fall into fundamentalism. The same reclaiming of our own voice in a world and Church where women's voices need urgently to be heard. And so, ultimately, the same movement into harmony where both scripts, the Ignatian one and the IBVM one have equal value. These give us access to that place where we learn that constitutions are about people not about procedure, about a theology or way of looking at God and a spirituality or way of living in terms of what we have seen. The learning is done when we begin to see that this involves making choices and so to discern.

Two further considerations inform our practice, however. Firstly, we too are historical people engaged in a more complicated dialogue than Mary Ward can ever have envisaged. Our world and our Church are a new context and make new demands. Mission and ministry, whether ordained or unordained, are buzz words. The world needs people whose way of life is sufficiently flexible for those words about 'the first characteristic of our way of life is to travel from place to place' to have some force and edge to them. And when one starts to travel one begins to hear the voice of other pilgrims in a world where faith and justice belong together and religious can no longer ignore the connection. Mary Ward's 'just soul', empowered by the freedom of Ignatius's *Constitutions* is both disciple and apostle.

Secondly we are burdened with 350 years during which we were unable to take the same. What have we been taking instead?

Various spiritualities which inhibit apostolic enterprise. Various practices which smack more of the monastery than the house in the rue Grosse in St Omer where we first began. A selection of rules which contained snippets from the *Constitutions* or from the Rules of the Roman House of the Society, but which have no shape and form. For too long we have been separated from the Ignatian dynamic and so have been deprived of the process which was to have been our inspiration.

The Ignatian dynamic

Both the *Exercises* and the *Constitutions* describe this process. At the heart of both lie models of formation into freedom which involve choices. Essentially the Ignatian person is a discerning person, someone who is empowered to make these choices through an interior knowledge of the way in which the good spirit and the evil spirit operate. What does this mean in practice? Various models have been advanced to explain the dynamic of the *Exercises*. Roughly they divide into two. The first see the text as a way of achieving union with God, its thrust being towards integration and coherence. A second set of interpretations see the purpose of the *Exercises* as elective, as a way of helping people hear and answer the call of God.

My own view is that the *Exercises* open up the individual who makes them to an experience of election which necessarily tends to union with God. More than this, they furnish the individual retreatant with a method that can then become a way of proceeding. More precisely, the individual who has learnt to discern the will of God in the context of a retreat can then go on to seek and find the will of God in all the other people and places and events of life.

The *Constitutions* meanwhile show the effects of this way of proceeding in the life of such a person. They show how the discerning person will continue to live with choices—and many of these are described in detail in this issue of the *Way Supplement*. The discerning person will become an apostolic person only to the extent that she or he seeks and finds God in the events of everyday life and engages there with the forces of the evil spirit who seeks to discourage and over-simplify or with forces of the good spirit whose voice is always a call. The formation process at the heart of the text is always about formation in discernment, even where this appears in less probable guise as, for instance, an experiment in a

hospital or on pilgrimage. The novelty of providing enlightened contexts for the practice of these experiments has perhaps blinded us to their purpose. What matters is not the experiment but the quality of reflection which precedes and accompanies and follows it. In miniature each experiment constitutes a paradigm and the discerning person is formed in a process which is gradually shown to have universal application.

The effects of 'Taking the same'

The effects of taking the same have been fairly dramatic. Where once upon of time the IBVM were instantly recognizable and had a very distinctive habitat they are now to be found anywhere. I have visited one of Mary Ward's companions in a black women's refuge in Chicago, in a university faculty in Toronto, in an all-night refuge in the East End of London. I have seen sisters prepare to work with alcohol and drug abusers, greet AIDS sufferers by name, nurse the dying and offer counselling at every level. I have seen them do outstanding work as retreat directors and admired their insights into fundamental Ignatian texts. I have seen them teach and learn and accompany and support. I have seen them live in ordinary houses on ordinary streets, journeying away from the security of an established past to a living future. I have seen them take care to provide adequate support for their more elderly members so that the notion of apostolic community is not jeopardized. I have seen them open these communities, bringing people in as well as going out to them. Religious houses are ready-made sheltered workshops, rape crisis centres, hostels and even hospices. I have seen IBVM houses act as each of these.

Above all I have seen them take seriously the commitment to discernment which is the most fundamental of all Ignatian attitudes. Both as individuals, through the practice of the consciousness examen or of regular spiritual direction, or as groups meeting week-in week-out to reflect and learn to listen to each other, Mary Ward's present-day companions are returning to the open circle which is the Painted Life's only representation of community. Indeed, each of the new ministries or new ways of imaging community life which I have described here is the result of a choice, and the future will hold fresh choices. It could be that in the last analysis this is what 'the same' means. It cannot mean any specific text or even any specific practice. Even to call it a spirituality is too nebulous, even though that may sound like heresy

at a time when 'Ignatian spirituality' is enjoying cult status. It has to be that way of proceeding in which the *Exercises* are forming us and which the *Constitutions* commit us to follow: the process of discernment.

If there are any criteria for judging what constitutes authentic taking, I believe they lie here. Diversification, both of the ministry and of ways of imaging how we belong to the 'Body', is a hallmark of how faithfully we are learning to become discerning people, how constantly we are learning to use the most useful and most Ignatian tool of all in our discerning of God's will: Both what has to be jettisoned and what has to be reclaimed become clear when the group learns to listen to the voice of the 'Spirit who writes and imprints upon the heart' and speaks within. Indeed, the recovery of our own myth is one of the most exciting marks of all, both at community and at personal level. I conclude that if the Spirit's words have to be written down in any text, whether Ignatius wrote it or Mary Ward, it is only to the end that these words 'be not forgot' and so that we return again and again to the place where God speaks within.

NOTES

¹ *Constitutions* [101]: 'It is highly important to bring this to the mind of those who are being examined, through their esteeming it highly and pondering it in the sight of Our Creator and Lord, to how great a degree it helps and profits one in the spiritual life to abhor in its totality and not in part whatever the world loves and embraces, and to accept and desire with all possible energy whatever Christ our Lord has loved and embraced . . .'

² This incident is discussed in greater detail and Mary Ward's text quoted in full in *Mary Ward: a pilgrim finds her way* by Lavinia Byrne IBVM, (Avila Press, Dublin, 1984), pp 41-47.

³ 'Third plan of the Institute' p 22 in *IBVM Constitutions*, Rome 1979.

⁴ Byrne: *op. cit.*, p 42.

⁵ *Constitutions* [134].

⁶ *Rules for ye Superior of every house*, Bar Convent Archives v22 B.C.A. The manuscript is preserved in a notebook measuring 19/16 cm with 105 pages.

⁷ Crawford, R.: *The King's evil*, 1911. Dr Johnson would later say, 'Women can spin very well; but they cannot make a good cookery book'. Martha Hansom's notebook is a nice answer to that particular example of sexual stereotyping, which is quoted by M. Aylett and O. Ordish in *First catch your hare*, (London, 1965).