
A WISDOM FIGURE FROM OUR PAST



A reflection on the life and spirit of Mary Ward

Christine Burke IBVM

The pictures on the cover are both from the Painted Life of Mary Ward.

Front Cover: Mary Ward with a group of close companions.

Back Cover: Mary Ward leaving England on one of her many voyages across the Channel.



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*"Let God's
vocation in
you be
constant,
efficacious
and loving."*

Wiefrid Wigmore, Jane Browne, Catharine Smith, Susanna Rookwood, Barbara Babthorpe and Barbara Ward are even less well known than Mary Ward's. They provided the friendship and shared vision that was crucial in sustaining her. That they caught her determination and resourcefulness is shown in the tenacious history of the order, in letters and writings after her death, but most resourcefully in the *Painted Life*, where they record the insights and visions that if written would have been anathema to authorities who were intent on proving that all access to God's will came through official channels. In these women God's vocation was constant, efficacious, and loving.

Mary's other resource was her inwardness, her relationship with God. She began many retreat jottings 'O Parent of parents and Friend of friends'. This unusual address speaks of her value on family and friendship and its inclusivity gives it a strangely modern ring. Her Friend of friends gave meaning to her life. Her staying power came from frequent meditation on the implications of following Jesus. His way was not to remove but to forgive enemies and to finally place every thing into the hands of the Parent of parents whose love gave meaning and purpose to efforts that seemingly ended in failure.

The incredible tension of remaining loyal, yet never giving up

on her own truth, is a challenge in our day. Shaking the dust from our feet sometimes seems the only way to choose life, yet she faced excommunication, imprisonment, the apparent destruction of her whole life's work, the stripping of all claim to the enterprises she and her women had started. To stay in, to refuse to compromise Catholicity or truth, to speak out, to believe that we are part of a greater gestation, that a new spirit will fill even this broken vessel we call Church, that to me is the great challenge.

FURTHER READING

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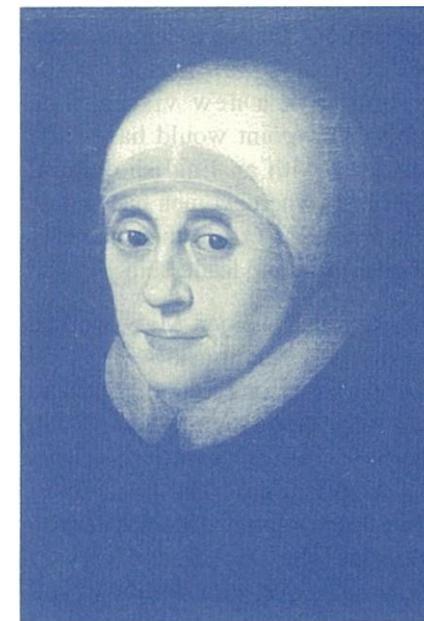
*Indicates that these are archival and not available in bookshops.

A Wisdom Figure From Our Past

Christine Burke IBVM

Wisdom figures are those from our past who continue to speak to our present. History is largely written by the victors but some quite startling women emerge from the mists to support, encourage and sustain us in the struggle. Mary Ward is one such woman in whom I rejoice, who challenges me, who is someone from whom I draw strength and a sense of balance and humor. She is a companion on my journey; to reflect on her life is to see my own situation with new eyes. In a time of searching she urges patient waiting that the 'new' may come to birth. In a time of conflicting demands she calls us to discernment flowing from attentive awareness of our own experience. When hope seems futile, her prayerful trust in the 'Parent of parents and Friend of friends' leads us to persevering strength rather than resigned bitterness. Making full use of her present and trusting the future to God, she found herself able to forgive and to build bridges between an intransigent Church and a new possibility.

Born in 1585 in Reformation England, Mary Ward belonged to a tradition of resistance. Her family, like many others on both sides of the battle that raged between the Reformers and Rome, placed a higher priority on the right to follow one's religious beliefs and



MARY WARD (1585-1645)

spirituality than on status and comfort. As resistance leaders, they alternated spells in jail with property loss, more active resistance with periods of underground activity and flight. The critical importance of faith was passed on to the children of the households in which Mary grew up. So also was a strong sense of pride in being English, of love of their country, of readiness to speak out for what they saw to be fair and right.

This was the civil context. Mary was also born into a Catholic Church regrouping after the challenges of

the Reformation. Spiritual, theological and organisational renewal removed many abuses and brought spiritual riches to the Church. At the time however, fears and tensions fuelled a centralisation and control which boded ill for anyone with a new vision. The Roman viewpoint would have little sympathy with an English cultural experience where women had shown in many walks of life their capacity for enterprise and leadership.

As a young woman Mary worked out that any relationship with God must be based on freedom; fear and guilt were destructive to love: 'I will do these things (small religious practices) with love and freedom, or leave them alone'. Despite family pressure she declined offers of marriage, even one which would cement the resistance of two stalwart Catholic families . An inner conviction that God was the focus of her life seemed to draw her to seclusion. At this stage of her search, such a focus ruled out active service.

Her inner journey required an outer one, and she illegally crossed the Channel in 1605 to join a religious order. After a year, she became convinced that her attempt to live a life of door-to-door begging was not her call. This year of poverty built on her heritage of political oppression and heightened her respect for poor people. She showed an ease in all levels of company and gained a trust in

Providence that was to be drawn on again and again in her life as she faced simply being without material necessities.

Her next step was to found a monastery for English women in Flanders since it was prohibited at home. While this flourished it soon became clear that even this choice of cloistered austerity and prayerful solitude was not for her. In the loneliness of this period, her certainty that God was working in her despite these false starts developed in her an amazing capacity for discernment. She could read her own responses, listen to her own heart and trust that God would confirm or shift her insights if she remained attentive. She came to know when to act, when to be silent, when to wait, when to argue strongly for what she believed.

'I will do these things with love and freedom or not at all'.

Mary Ward

At twenty-four she was again alone, back in England, spending her time and money on good works, waiting for God to give the next lead. The experience that convinced her God was calling her to

conviction that however much corruption she encountered, the Church was greater than the men who had authority. She would push as hard as she could for this new work, outwitting many a Holy Office spy in her endeavour, but she would never sink to their method of vilification or choose against the Church. Her painful experiences of the effects of Christian divisions made loyalty and unity key values for her. Her forgiveness sometimes stretched the comprehension of her closest friends, so that they said it was better to be her enemy than her friend, but that did not stop her knowing who were her enemies. She was nobody's fool in the struggle she faced. Circumventing the isolation rules of her imprisonment, she smuggled out notes written in lemon juice (invisible until warmed by a candle flame) encouraging her companions and urging them to write to the highest authority, the Pope. She was convinced her imprisonment at least was happening without his knowledge.

After her release, Mary believed strongly enough in her vision to start again in the mid 1630s on her quiet round of education and formation, gathering around her the women who remained. They had no immediate claim to being a religious order, but were dedicated to what they saw as God's possibilities for women. To the last she believed that this work was of God. In 1645 on her death bed, in a farm house



Mary Ward

outside of York in her beloved England, she urged the few companions with her to cherish God's vocation in them, that it be constant, efficacious, and loving.

From where did Mary Ward draw her strength and perseverance? Her life gives some clues. Not surprisingly, a strong network of women friends provided encouragement and support. Her early companions especially were a company of friends. Her letters leave no doubt as to the affection and trust she placed in them, leaving them in charge of huge enterprises, aware of their aloneness while she is away in another part of Europe, grateful for their love and support. These women's names: Mary Poyntz,

Her commitment to this vision for women, in the face of disbelieving Church authority, is the stuff of heroism and tragedy.

Her belief in women had a ripple effect which disturbed accepted norms. Young women were attracted to share in this enterprise with Mary and her companions. There was no way Church authorities could accept that this group constituted a religious order. They urged her to accept some other rule for women, but she refused any form of enclosure 'even two sticks in the shape of a cross'. She would not resort to any prevarication, but kept insisting that what she asked for was both possible and valuable. She herself addressed the cardinals set up to assess her case. Instead of being cowed by their spies and disapproval, she set up houses and schools right under their eyes in Rome, begging them to widen their horizons of thought and prejudice, to learn from experience. The hidden agenda of a woman putting her own case in Latin, expecting to be treated as an equal, spoke more loudly than the evidence she produced. The implications are still unthinkable within the curial walls.

She called the period that followed 'the long loneliness'. Her dark night is one familiar to many: seeing what needs to be done but frustrated in the doing by the very authorities recognised as crucial if an enterprise is to remain part of the long Christian tradition. The level of

suspicion, of innuendo, of attempt to discredit her personal life and her works makes some more recent efforts at bringing new thinkers to heel pale by comparison. Her refusal to be overwhelmed by malice and small-mindedness grew from her conviction that if God wanted something to happen, it was God's responsibility to ensure it did, so long as she had done all in her power to bring it about. Somehow this left her free to forgive her enemies and yet convinced her that she could not yield to their limited vision.

'Cherish God's vocation in you'.

Mary Ward

The 1620s went from bad to worse. The stated aim of authority was to eradicate this group forever. Suppression of the Institute and Mary's imprisonment in Munich by Church authorities came in 1631-32. The Bull of Suppression turned many of her sisters in Europe out into the midst of the Thirty Years War and most of the houses were taken over by the local bishops.

Throughout this persecution Mary showed two qualities: a refusal to be budged from her certainty that this work was from God, and a

something new came while she was doing her hair in front of the mirror. It was not a 'vanity, vanity' insight, but a deeply moving reassurance that *God's glory* could be served by her, a confirmation that she did have a contribution to make. In an era when Church authorities thought that a woman might save her own soul (if indeed she had one) by prayer and fasting but was too fickle to be of any assistance to others, such a conviction was revolutionary. That it was the direction for her time is attested by the speed at which it took root among women. Suddenly there were five friends equally committed, prepared to join her, believing in the possibility of something different. This small company of friends embarked again across the Channel, set up house and began teaching to gain a living, while they waited for this new possibility to clarify.

I'm an impatient sort of person. A few months waiting, unsure of the direction, is crippling for me. When I think of Mary, a dynamic woman, who responded so quickly to possibilities later in her life, I'm in awe at the depth forged in her in these early years by waiting. No wonder her relief was so heartfelt when the drought broke. In 1611, when she was twenty six, she saw her direction with clarity. Decisive influences from her youth pointed to adopting Ignatian spirituality, but no one had considered the possibility of a women's order based on the model

of the Society of Jesus. Now she saw this was to be the way. The few words 'Take the same of the Society' gave:

so great a measure of light..., so much comfort and strength, and so changed the whole soul that it was impossible for me to doubt that they came from him whose words are works.

She says no insight was more hard won, the joy it brought not to be measured, 'to have certainty where there was none'. It unleashed energies she had been holding back.

But this way was to win her no friends. It was regarded as a privilege for the Jesuits to be exempted from the bishops' jurisdiction. Though she hastened to make it quite clear that she wanted no legal or structural link to the Jesuits, only the right to use their Constitutions, Jesuits and non-Jesuits alike were dismayed. She would have an order of women, under a woman's leadership, responsible only to the Pope, free to be sent wherever there was a need, to work at defending the faith and promoting it 'through any means congruous to the times'. Especially in these times where no schooling was available to girls, Mary advocated education of young women from all walks of life, and instruction of adults in the faith, helping them by living among them if this was necessary. She envisioned the latter taking place especially in

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England, where to preach the Catholic faith was treason.

At a time when religious vows were to be maintained by external restraints, strict law and enclosure, she sought for her women a formation that would enable them to remain true to their calling whether they were living in a rich household, in a servant's lodgings, or in a religious community. Such a formation recognised women as capable of personal responsibility and integrity, and called them to know their own hearts, not being swayed by outside pressures but discerning the action of God in each one and in the community. She took for granted women's ability to read the signs of their times and to Respond where the need seemed greatest.

These proposals caused scandal on two fronts. First, her women moved around without habit or enclosure: they were tagged 'galloping girls' and 'wandering gossips'. Secondly, they presumed to engage in works which were the preserve of men, and priests at that, . . . and the women did well at them! The few annals we have tell stories of the remarkable women on the English mission, travelling incognito, sometimes in prison, having to sit listening to priests as well as government agents denounce these Jesuitesses. While Mary was in England during 1617-19 the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury set up a particular search for her saying he wanted Mary Ward

caught because she 'did more hurt than six or seven Jesuits'. That must have galled. Some enlightened bishops and priests stood by her, but many resorted to slander (Vatican archives show that 'lobbing the prophet' is no new phenomenon), to intrigue, to meddling in the internal affairs of the fledgling group and also the small slurs that can undermine any woman's confidence.

Mary sensed that if her women took on the perspective of these belittlers all hope for a new enterprise was lost. Her wonderful speech on women was in response to a priest who said 'Their fervour will decay, for after all, they are but women'. Her reply points out that fervour is a gift of God, that there is no such difference between men and women that means women's fervour must diminish. Both men and women can lose fervour if they allow lies to lead them rather than verity, truth:

There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things . . . and I hope to God it will be seen that women in time to come will do much . . . Heretofore we have been told by men we must believe. It is true we must, but let us be wise, and know what we are to believe and what not, and not be made to think we can do nothing. If women were made so inferior to men in all things, why were they not exempted in all things, as they are in some?

For what think you of this word 'but women' but as if we were in all things inferior to some other creature which I suppose to be man! Which I make 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 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.

'There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things'.

Mary Ward

She urged her women to 'love verity' and to seek knowledge for the sake of the Kingdom, so that one can profit oneself and others. Mary recounts hearing a priest thanking God that he had not been born a woman because a woman could not apprehend God.

I answered nothing only smiled, although I could have answered him by the experience I have of

the contrary. I could have been sorry for his want – I mean not want of judgement, for he is a man of very good judgement; his want is in experience.

These insights speak of a woman in touch with her own experience, alert to its implications beyond herself, aware which situations are worth battling. This owning of her experience grounded her for the struggle that lay ahead.

In 1615, while on retreat, Mary had an experience that focused the qualities needed to live this life. The words *freedom, justice and sincerity* captured for her the essence of a spirituality for apostolic women: freed from undue attachments, ready to apply themselves to all works of justice, and sincere so that 'we may be such as we appear and appear such as we are'. This was another way of expressing the Ignatian insight that despite spiritual traditions based on withdrawal from the world, God is also to be found in everyday encounters and in service of others. For Mary, bringing all activities and experiences honestly before God, 'free to refer all to God', would lead to 'true wisdom'. Lest this 'singular freedom' seem daunting, there is a gentleness in Mary's approach and a sense of gift:

This seems the way: that they should first know it, after desire, and endeavour for it a little, and that God would do the rest.