

# Celebrating Women Witnesses

## A Project to Rediscover Women Leaders in the Catholic Church

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### Introduction

In 1631 the Vatican Inquisition called her “a heretic, a schismatic, a rebel against holy Church” and had her thrown into prison. In 1951, some 320 year later, Pope Pius XII called her “that incomparable woman given...to the Church in one of the darkest, most blood-stained periods of history.”

Her name, Mary Ward, is not widely recognized in the modern world. But it ought to be. She might well be the model and patron saint of every woman or man who dares in good faith to dissent on particular declarations of official Church policy. Ward’s dissent was deliberate, quite public and increasingly controversial for more than 21 years. It was also extraordinarily effective. The record shows that Mary Ward dissented not out of pride or malice but of concern for the pastoral needs of Catholics that were not being met at the time.

She wrote not a single angry word against the institutional Church or the papacy, even after she was arrested, placed in prison and denied the sacraments. Her writings reveal a woman who was afire on the inside for the gospel and the empowerment of women, yet remained on the outside calm and imperturbable.

### Historical Background

At the age of 21 Mary Ward left her native England and traveled to what is now Belgium to join a religious order. Historians have marveled how this young woman – still in her 20s – could have done so much, so quickly, and so at variance with the established rules of Mother Church.

She was a member of an old English Catholic family which held to its understanding of the faith throughout the Anglican reform. Many members of her family had been imprisoned and fined, and several relatives were executed. More often than not, it was the Catholic wives and mothers who proved most resistant to changing their allegiance from Catholicism to the Anglican communion.

Ward obviously acquired during her formative years a powerful memory of strong women—and that influence unquestionably countered for her the limited societal and ecclesial expectations of women in her time.

Women’s resistance became so common in the late 1500s that a law was passed allowing the state to confiscate two thirds of a non-cooperating widow’s assets, leaving her virtually penniless. The Catholic resistance in England was essentially a women’s movement, according to historian John Bossy. “On few points in the early history of English Catholicism,” he wrote, “is there such a unanimous convergence of evidence as on the importance of the part played by women.”<sup>1</sup>

Mary Ward felt called to assist Catholics who were denied access to religious instruction and the ministry of priests in England. She believed a religious community could be a way to help. She quickly

discovered there was no way she could perform this sort of apostolic action as a nun in an established order, due to current Church regulations. The Council of Trent, which ended just 22 years before her birth, had banned any and all apostolic works on the part of sisters. The women’s teaching and nursing orders, which flourished for a time in the early 16th century, were required to alter their statutes and accept lives of enclosure and contemplation. The Council had ordered all bishops “under the judgment of God and pain or eternal malediction” to ensure that all nuns under their jurisdictions live in total enclosure. “It shall be unlawful,” said Trent, “for any nun to go out of the convent, even for a short period, under any pretext

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whatever, except for some lawful cause which must be explicitly approved by the bishop.”

These rigid decrees were consistent with the prevailing attitude toward women in that era. A popular spiritual directory in the 17th century counseled directors of retreats for women, to follow “a simple form as is appropriate for persons of little education, unless one or other among the women should have the capacity for spiritual things.”

### **Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

Ward returned to England and taught the Catholic faith (often secretly) and visited prisons. But she could not get rid of her conviction that women in community could and should work for the Church outside the cloister, especially in difficult times. With a few supportive young women she developed the essentials of a new religious order to be known as the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM).

*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,” she wrote, “such a life as his Blessed Mother seems to have led ... and many holy virgins and widows; ... that we more easily instruct virgins and young girls from their earliest years in piety, Christian morals and the liberal arts that they may afterwards, according to their respective vocations profitably embrace either the secular or the religious state.<sup>2</sup>*

Unlike the communities of sisters required by the Council of Trent, Ward’s community would be totally unenclosed and uncloistered, with the members having no restrictions on movement; they would live in the world, in the areas where they worked; they would wear the conventional, secular dress of the time (a necessity in England where Catholic religious orders with their distinctive habits were banned). The Institute, she insisted, would not be subject to the control of local bishops; it would be subject to its own leadership, although the goal was to work cooperatively with clergy of every rank, as well as laity. The entire operation would be organized and governed entirely by the women themselves; they would follow insofar as practical “the matter and manner” of the Society of Jesus, answerable only to God and the pope.

Within a few years Ward and her associates returned to Belgium to recruit members for their religious order, not only among exiled Catholics from England but from other countries. IBVM membership quickly grew. There was need everywhere in post-Reformation Europe for evangelizing and counseling and ministering to poor people, especially women and children. Under Ward’s direction, houses of the order were established in Germany, the Netherlands, England (secretly, of course) and even in Rome. Ward saw the Church beginning to look at women differently and was eager for the more open attitude to spread: “I hope in God that it will be seen in time that women will do much.”

In 1615, five years after the founding of the IBVM progress was going so well that Mary Ward appealed to

the pope for formal approval of her non-canonical order. The contingent of women was growing and calls were coming from throughout Europe for assistance from this innovative Institute. Jesuit priests were especially helpful in assisting and training the young women; lay support for the movement was strong.

### **Persecution and Opposition**

Pope Pius V gave the IBVM petition an ambiguous and temporary approval, noting that full, formal recognition would depend on an examination of the order by the appropriate Vatican congregations. Ward was delighted and established new foundations in the next few years in Belgium and Germany; and in London and Suffolk in England. Ward herself spearheaded the English effort. Here her members could move about somewhat freely since they wore no distinctive, religious garb. Despite the precautions they took, several Institute members were arrested and imprisoned for a time. According to one report, Ward was apprehended in London in 1618, and “a sentence of death was passed upon her for religion.” Somehow she managed to escape the sentence and returned to her work.

In the early 1620s the work of Mary Ward and her followers attracted opposition. Some Jesuits mocked these “galloping girls” of unlimited energy who seemed to be everywhere; other critics saw them as a real threat to the clerical status quo. Important members of the English clergy, who had a representative in Rome, began lobbying for suppression of the Institute. “They cited the boldness of women who seek to instruct others in the catechism and bring them to acts of contrition and meditation, whose lives resemble those of the laity, and who cause great scandal by their lack of enclosure.”<sup>3</sup>

Nine years passed in silence after Ward sought official Church approbation, so she petitioned again to the new pope, Urban VIII. He responded by ordering the immediate closing of the IBVM foundations in Rome and elsewhere in Italy. He said and did nothing more. Despite the rebuke, Ward opened new houses in Germany, Austria and Bavaria. In her writings she referred often to Ignatius of Loyola’s emphasis on detachment and resignation, urging her associates to keep themselves “in balance” since everything depends on God’s “liberality,” of which all of them had already received a “more than full measure.” She reminded them that as Christians they stood under the banner of the cross and must be prepared to endure “the long loneliness”—the deprivation of human support and sometimes even the sense of God’s presence.

### **Suppression of the Institute**

In 1631 Urban published a papal bull that suppressed the Institute and any other non-canonical groups like it. He referred to them as “pernicious growths.”

*We have learned, not without great displeasure, that in several parts of Italy and beyond the mountains, certain women or virgins take the name of Jesuitesses without any approbation from the Holy See. Being gathered for several years under the pretext of living the religious life, they have ... founded buildings in the form of colleges; they have erected houses of probation. They*

*have a superior general over their pretended congregation and have made vows in her hands ... in imitation of the solemn vows; they go freely everywhere without respect for the laws of cloister under the pretext of working for the salvation of souls ... and they are accustomed to undertake ... other works very little in conformity with the weakness of their sex and their spirit ... [and little in conformity] with feminine modesty and above all with virginal shame ... works many highly distinguished in the science of sacred letters would only undertake with difficulty and with great circumspection.*  
(*Pastoralis Romani Pontifici*)

The vows of IBVM members were dissolved. They could admit no new members and were compelled to shut down all their schools and foundations. They were given

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the alternatives of joining an established religious order, finding local bishops under whose regulations they could work, or entering the "honorable state of matrimony."

### **Imprisonment**

Mary Ward was in Munich when she heard the news. She took no immediate action, awaiting a published copy of the bull. The Vatican, however, would countenance no delay. They had her arrested and imprisoned in Munich without any idea if she would ever be released. Fearing she would die there, she asked for the sacraments. Her request was denied unless she would renounce her heresy. She regarded any retraction as "betrayal of the many innocent and deserving persons who supported me." She chose instead to forego the sacraments and rely entirely on the mercy of God: "I have never done or said anything either great or small against his Holiness ... or the authority of Holy Church. But on the contrary, my feeble powers and labours have been for twenty-six years entirely ... employed for the honour and service of both, as I hope, by the mercy of God and the benignity of His Holiness, will be manifested in due time and place."<sup>4</sup>

She wrote to the members of the Institute, urging them to be "expedite and quietly industrious and to commend the case to God that He would vouchsafe to enlighten and forgive all and would use all you do to his honour. Let us let God do what He will in His turn." Her letters were written in lemon juice, apparently to make them illegible to

her jailers. Ward's stay in prison lasted two months. Upon her release she tried to assist members of the now dissolved Institute to establish new lives.

Two years after publication of the bull, Urban relented a bit, withdrew the personal charges of heresy and schism against Ward and allowed former Institute members to continue living in Rome if they wished. He emphasized, however, that he was not rescinding any of the other provisions of the bull.

The impact of the suppression was enormous. Said historian Bossy, "If I were asked to choose a single incident to illustrate the turn of the tide [against Roman Catholicism in England], I would suggest the rejection of the ideal and practice embodied in Mary Ward's Institute of Mary." In rejecting it, he said, Church officials put the law over the spirit, abandoned the Catholic cause and thereby "missed the boat for a couple of generations."

Ward returned to England, and for her remaining fourteen years lived as a layperson with a group of close companions, teaching and catechizing when possible. In a letter to veterans of the IBVM struggle in 1645, the year of her death, she asked them to always see the practice of God's vocation in whatever they did and to love freely without expecting recognition or reward. Nor should they grieve over her. "It matters not the who but the what," she said. "And when God will enable me to be in place I will serve you."

### **Vindication**

As it turned out, several former IBVM members, later joined by other women, took her words to heart and continued to live as quasi-religious in several areas, maintaining the basics of the Institute, including freedom from enclosure. Seventy-two years later, the successors of this group won approval from Pope Clement XI. Pope Pius IX, in 1877, gave final and official approbation to the order, which was growing rapidly. By the early 20th century it had schools and foundations on every continent and continues to this day. Yet, it was only in 1909, that the modern IBVMs were allowed to identify Mary Ward as their foundress. She was finally vindicated in 1951 when Pope Pius XII called Mary Ward "that incomparable woman given by Catholic England to the Church." at the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate in Rome. In a sense Mary Ward anticipated by some 350 years Vatican II's *Decree on Religious Life*:



*It serves the best interests of the Church for communities to have their own special character and purpose,” said the council. “Communities should promote among their members a suitable awareness of contemporary human conditions and of the needs of the Church. For if their members can combine the burning zeal of an apostle with wise judgments made in the light of faith concerning the circumstances of the modern world,” they will be able to serve the world more effectively.*

How Mary Ward was able to maintain such tranquility remains a mystery of grace. Somehow she found a way to harmonize the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between obedience to the law and the movement of the Spirit within her. She loved the Church in its fullness—and that meant doing what needed to be done even if it required bypassing certain institutional restrictions and then, as she said, letting “God do what He will in His turn.”

**Notes:**

1. Cited in Robert McClory, *Faithful Dissenters: Stories of Men and Women Who Loved and Changed the Church* (New York, Orbis, 2000), 59
2. Cited in Jeanne Cover, *Love — the Driving Force: Mary Ward's Spirituality* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1997), 83
3. Cited in McClory, *Faithful Dissenters*, 61
4. Cited in Cover, *Love — the Driving Force*, 170

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Jeanne Cover, *Love — the Driving Force: Mary Ward's Spirituality* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1987)  
Henriette Peters, *Mary Ward: A World in Contemplation* (Germany, Gracewing Press, 1994)  
Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, editor, *Heart and Mind of Mary Ward* (London, Weathampsted Press, 1985)  
M. Emmanuel Orchard, editor, *Till God Will: Mary Ward Through Her Writings* (London, Dutton, Longman and Todd, 1985)  
M. Byrne, *Mary Ward: A Pilgrim Finds Her Way* (Dublin, Carmelite Centre of Spirituality, 1984)

The feast day for Mary Ward is celebrated on January 23. Please use the enclosed prayer service in your parish or small faith community on that date or at another appropriate time.

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## Prayer Service Honoring Mary Ward

*Celebrate Mary Ward's feast on January 23 or at any other time*

*Prepare ahead: Mustard seeds individually wrapped in a small plastic "baggie" and tied with a colorful ribbon... or wrapped in colorful tissue paper. Place mustard seeds in large basket on a table covered with a white cloth next to a lighted candle. Have readily available colorful "post it notes," pencils or pens.*

**Opening Song:** *God Beyond All Names* (©1990 Bernadette Farrell, Oregon Catholic Press *Today's Missal Music* #487) or *We Will Rise Again* (©1985 David Haas Oregon Catholic Press, *Today's Missal Music Issue* #451)

**Reading I** (*Three Readers are needed*)

**Narrator 1:** Mary Ward was born in England in 1585 and died there in 1645. The years between took her on a journey of faith to found and shape a new kind of church ministry for women. At first Mary thought she was to found a traditional order. She loved the peace and seclusion of enclosed convent Rule and actually came to the point of making vows.

**Narrator 2:** But on May 2, 1609 Mary had an overwhelming religious experience. Like Abraham and Sarah, she believed she was being called to leave what she knew and go to an unfamiliar place. She said the experience came with such force "that it annihilated and reduced me to nothing." After talking her experience over with her spiritual companion and confessor, Fr. Roger Lee, SJ, she went back to England to minister to those who had no one to teach them about God.

**Narrator 1:** Mary wanted her companions to meet the needs of the times. Unlike her predecessors, her Institute would not be cloistered or controlled by the local bishop but governed by the women themselves. However, the goal would be to work cooperatively with clergy and laity of every rank.

**Narrator 2:** Gropingly, tentatively, painfully, she began the loneliness of the long journey that led to the fulfillment of her own prophecy that women would share actively in the church's ministry. She was accused of heresy by church officials and it was not until 1909, 264 years after her death that she was publicly acknowledged as the founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (also known in some places as the Sisters of Loretto) which today has tens of thousands of members and affiliates all over the world. She wrote to one of her early sisters:

**Mary Ward Voice:** I think dear child, the trouble and the long loneliness you hear me speak of is not far from me, which whensoever it is, happy success will follow..."

**Narrator1:** And to Pope urban she wrote:

**Mary Ward Voice:** "If a greater punishment be judged necessary than publicly to be declared a heretic, a schismatic, an obstinate rebel against Holy Church; to be taken and imprisoned as such; to have been at the gates of death...if all this is to little, I offer my poor and short life..." (writings adapted from *Woman Saints* (Orbis) by Kathleen Jones pp 288 and *People's Companion to the Breviary* © 1997, Indianapolis Carmelites p. 552.

**Psalm Response:** *"What you Hear in the Dark, You Must Speak in the Light. You are Salt for the Earth, You are Light for the World"* (Cantor sings vs 1 and 2 (Daniel Schutte © 1975, NALR # 264 *Glory and Praise*)

**Reading II** Luke 18: 1-8 (The unscrupulous judge and the persistent widow)

**Response:** *What you Hear in the Dark, ...*

### Faith Reflection

**Side 1:** "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it our ancestors received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the Word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things unseen."

**Response:** "But when (Jesus/The Human One) comes, will (he find/there be) any faith on earth?"

**Side 2:** "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered God faithful..."

**Response:** "But when (Jesus/The Human One) comes, will (he find/there be) any faith on earth?"

**Side 1:** “Therefore from one couple, and they as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as innumerable as grains of sand by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar. But as it is, they desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God and has prepared for them a dwelling place. (above readings adapted from Hebrews 11)

**Response:** “But when (Jesus/The Human One) comes, will (he find/there be) any faith on earth?”

**Side 2:** “The crucial point is that unfaith, like faith, is a phenomenon occurring at two essentially different levels of human life. At the deepest level...it is, one may say, an atheism in the bottom of the heart, instead of an atheism in the top of the mind...One may affirm God’s reality with one’s mind as well as one’s lips, and yet deny Divine Reality by actually existing as a godless person.” (Schubert N. Ogden in Finding God, as adapted compiled by Louis Savery and Thomas O’Connor)

**Side 1:** “But when (Jesus/The Human One) comes, will (he find/there be) any faith on earth?”

**All:** O God, we walk by faith, not by sight. Help us to take heart from the life of your disciple Mary Ward whose indomitable faith helped her to believe in the vision for women’s ministry first planted by you. We want to believe too.. help now our unbelief.

### Reading III

**Narrator I:** “The Queen remarked ...”Now I’ll give you something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.” “I can’t believe that!” said Alice. “Can’t you?”the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: Draw a long breath and shut your eyes.” Alice laughed, “There’s no use trying,” she said.”One can’t believe impossible things.” “I daresay you haven’t had much practice” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” (Lewis Carrol, *Alice in Wonderland*)

**Response:** “*What your hear in the Dark...*”

**Reflection:** *The prayer leader offers a short reflection from her (or his) own experience of believing in or trying to believe in impossible things...perhaps linking it to the belief of Mary Ward. Group members are then invited to reflect individually about some “impossible thing” in which they would like to believe but just can’t seem to yet (world peace, women’s full equality in sacramental ministry, full human rights for gay and lesbian people, healing of an addicted family member... whatever seems right and of the Spirit). Depending on the size of the group you may wish to break into smaller circles of three or four. Give people time to reflect and share about their own experiences of belief and unbelief. Ask each person to choose one such “impossible thing” and write it on a small piece of paper to bring to prayer.*

**Ritual:** *While quiet music plays in the background (perhaps an instrumental rendition *Blest Are They* David Hass © 1985 G.I. A. #543 in *Gather*) or *The Impossible Dream* from *Man of La Mancha* by Mitch Leigh and Joe Darian ©1973 MCA Records) each individual approaches the altar in turn with his/ her paper. As each person places their paper in the basket, s/ he is given a mustard seed with words of blessing: “**Go in the peace of Christ, for with God, all things are possible.**” The presider begins and then each person in succession blesses the person behind them while handing them a mustard seed.*

**Closing Prayer:** (All) Jesus, you who once said: “I tell you solemnly, if anyone says to this mountain, “Get up and throw yourself into the sea,” with no hesitation in their heart but believing that it will happen, it will be done,” increase my faith this day. Let it grow at least to the size of a mustard seed. Help me to believe that you can make impossible things possible. Like Mary Ward help me to trust you even through trial and persecution until your vision for our lives together becomes that of the whole world. Amen.

**Closing Song:** *We Walk By Faith* (Martty Haugen © 1984 G.I.A. #414 in the *Gather*) or *Impossible Dream*, (from *Man of La Mancha* by Mitch Leigh and Joe Darian © 1973 MCA Records)) or *Blest Are They* or *We Shall Overcome*

Service prepared by Christine Schenk cjs who has Master’s degrees in Midwifery and Theology  
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Name \_\_\_\_\_

*Mary Ward: An Incomparable Woman*

1. Answer the following questions about the context of Mary Ward's life and work.

- In what country was Mary Ward born?
- What was the social status of her family?
- Historically, what was happening in her country that made life difficult for her and her family?
- How old was Mary when she left her native country?
- Why did she leave to go to Belgium?

2. What role did women play during the time of England's break from Catholicism?

3. What effect did the women's resistance have on Mary Ward?

4. The Council of Trent banned any and all apostolic works on the part of women's religious orders. What were two of the apostolic works that the nuns were doing?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What was the Church's attitude toward women during the era of Mary Ward?

6. What did the Council of Trent tell the bishops about what nuns must do and not do.

They must....

They may not...

7. What was the original mission of the *Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary* that Mary Ward founded when she returned to her native country?

8. Name three ways that Mary Ward's community of sisters differed from other women's religious orders of the time.

1.

2.

3.

9. Following the example of the Society of Jesus (an all-male order of priests and brothers whose founder was Ignatius of Loyola; also known as Jesuits), to whom would Mary's group of women consider their only authority?

10. Name six countries where Mary Ward established branches of her order:

1.

4.

2.

5.

3.

6.

11. Why did the Vatican order Mary Ward arrested and imprisoned? What was the charge against her?

12. What eventually happened to the order of nuns that Mary Ward founded?

13. What does the life and witness of this 17<sup>th</sup> century woman have to say to Catholic women and men today?

14. Write a brief paragraph about Mary Ward using the following adjectives (found in the article) to describe her: *incomparable, deliberate, controversial, imperturbable*. Use the adjectives in sentences showing you understand the meaning of each word as applied to Mary.