

HOMILY: MARY WARD CELEBRATION 8TH OCTOBER 2009

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Most of us will probably remember when we first heard the name 'Mary Ward'. I first heard about Mary Ward from IBVM sisters in Cambridge, all three of whom, I'm delighted to say, are here in this church today: one was an assistant chaplain then; two were students. When I began, the year after university, as a seminarian at the English College here in Rome, I was struck, as I came down the stairs on my first morning, to see a portrait of Mary Ward close by the list of the 44 martyrs who trained there. Many of you will have seen these two memorials earlier today when you visited the Venerable. I soon discovered why Mary's portrait was there; and why it stood alongside the list of College martyrs. It was because she was at home there. And rightly so, since many of her sisters had brothers who had trained there; and many of her sisters' families welcomed English College alumni to their homes, at the risk of severe punishment, even death.

We know that when Mary and her companions arrived in Rome, they came first to the tomb of St Peter; and then came straightaway to the tomb of St Ignatius, Mary staying two hours by each of them. Then they made their way towards the English quarter; they stayed close to the Ponte Sisto; but soon established a remarkably successful school alongside the English seminary, on the corner of Via Monserrato and Via Montoro. In time, four sisters came to be buried in the College church: Mary Ward's own sister, Barbara, whom Mary nursed until she died of smallpox; Elizabeth Cotton, Catherine Dawson, and another Barbara, Barbara Babthorpe, whose brother was a seminarian there around 1615.

My awareness of Mary Ward's importance was heightened in my first year of seminary by the visit of Pope John Paul II to Mary's native York in 1982. There the Pope described her as "an extraordinary Yorkshire woman, pioneer of the active unenclosed congregations of women ... who taught the Gospel of Jesus Christ to English exiles ... inspiring women today to take their rightful place in the life of the Church, as befits their equality of rights and particular dignity."

Yet we know what consternation Mary caused by her arrival in Rome in 1621. One Cardinal told her he had twenty-five spies watching her. But then one of the spies reported that what he saw suggested canonisation rather than condemnation. Spies would have observed her moving from one church to another, particularly the churches close to her school in the via Monserrato - San Girolamo built on the site of St Philip Neri's first oratory, Santa Maria di Monserrato, where St Ignatius himself used to minister and preach, Sant' Eligio, and the church of the English College itself: in the College church she liked to mediate on the image known so well by each of the College martyrs of God the Father raising up the body of the crucified Christ above the motto "Ignem Veni Mittere in Terram", "I came to bring fire to the earth".

She told her directors that in these times of prayer she received two graces: a deep conviction that she was following the will of God; accompanied by the grace to forgive her detractors. Such was her capacity for forgiveness that friends used to say of her, "it was better to be an enemy than a friend of Mary Ward - she would love you more deeply." When I heard that, I thought immediately how similar it was to what one has always heard about St Thérèse of Lisieux. We've all been struck and will recall, I'm sure, of how Thérèse would reserve her sweetest smile for the sister who most irritated her and by so doing came to love her.

Cardinal Hume saw parallels with Thérèse too: in his case it was their courage about the way men treated them because they were women which struck him most forcibly. Speaking on the 4th

Centenary of Mary Ward's birth, Cardinal Hume recalled the words of St Thérèse herself: "How women are despised! And yet many more women love God, and during the Passion of Our Lord the women showed more courage than the Apostles. They endured the insults of the soldiers and ventured to wipe the adorable face of Jesus. Because he chose to be despised, he allows women to suffer the same fate during their stay on earth." "Rather strong stuff!" said the Cardinal. "Indeed, he said, "I hesitated to quote it for that reason." He went on to say, "Mary Ward saw that women," – I suppose I would say some women – "in religious life had to be different to what had been the custom. They had to be in the world ... Mary Ward had to be very determined if her vision of what should be was realised ... being prayerful she was able to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit but her critics prevailed." "Yet," he concluded, with a degree of foresight, "recognition of her heroic sanctity will doubtless come."

Mary received in prayer, as I say, the conviction that she was following the will of God; and the grace to forgive those who obstructed her. Like her namesake Mary of Magdala, she had heard the Lord call her name and she recognised him. When the then Cardinal Ratzinger preached in Rome on the 4th centenary of Mary Ward's birth, he acknowledged this too. He made reference to that lovely picture of Mary Ward's first years. "The little child," he said, "has left her bed and taken the first steps towards the open space of life. From her mouth has come her first word, the name of Jesus. One gets the impression," he continued, "that little Mary is following the sound of that word, walking along the trail of that name. Her first steps coincide with her first word. The name Jesus became the path of her life. In fact, the many journeys in the life of Mary Ward were always made in the ambit of that name, all her life was a response to the call expressed in the name of Jesus." And as Pope Benedict, he blessed the celebration earlier this year in York, noting how, "for four hundred years religious women have drawn inspiration from Mary Ward's determination and courage ... and many more have benefited from the spiritual guidance and the formation ... offered by (them)."

The English College archives recall that in 1627 Mary Ward and her sisters presented to the College a silver chalice. Such a gift was surely received as an echo of the Lord's question to his first disciples, "Can you drink the cup that I will drink?" The seminarians are unlikely to have known that, in the church of San Marco, by the Piazza Venezia, Jesus had called her to drink deep those words and shown her a vision of what trials she would suffer. But I'm sure all of this was in her heart as she gave that cup to future martyrs for their Eucharist.

I like to think of the students, when they had completed their studies and were ready to return to the mission, making their way down the 15th century staircase which we still have in the College, out into Via Monserrato, towards the river and along its bank to the Flaminian Gate, setting their faces like flint for England. I have no doubt that, as they went, they will have made a first stop immediately with their neighbours, the sisters of Mary's Institute tending for the poor children of Rome, to exchange farewells and the promise of prayers. If those newly ordained priests had one question burning in their hearts, it must surely have been, "Can we drink the cup?" I have no doubt that everything about the demeanour of Mary and her sisters, their peace and courage, their unreserved abandonment to Divine Providence, will have spoken to them deeply the reply, "Yes, we can."