Freedom, Justice and Sincerity: Reflections on the Life and Spirituality of Mary Ward

Christine E. Burke IVBM


The author of this relatively short book states that her primary audience, in writing these reflections, 'has been the many dedicated teachers in schools run under the auspices of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Congregatio Jesu, both of which share the charism and legacy of Mary Ward' (viii). The appearance of such a book is indeed timely as networks of colleges and schools, each stemming from the faith and vision of specific religious founders, are increasingly entrusted to lay staffing. This newer group of dedicated educators, together with school board members, parents and influential groupings of alumni/ae, are seeking, under the guidance of the founding religious institutes, to preserve and further develop the specific spirit and ethos – charism – of their particular spiritual tradition.

It goes without saying that this quest, if it is to succeed in preserving and richly transmitting a mosaic of charisms, must be open to complementarity and avoid an undermining competitiveness. Christine Burke's informed and insightful study provides an admirable example of the type of text to serve well her claimed primary audience. However, it also merits a thoughtful readership among a more extended circulation. The author has not been afraid to introduce and explore questions such a study as this will raise in the minds of many: continuing loyalty to the Church; feminist issues; forgiving a spirituality and guiding ethic for today. In all of these an analysis of Mary Ward's life can offer enlightening, trustworthy pointers amid current dilemmas of which the author is patently aware.

The book is arranged in three sections with Part One situating Mary Ward in the context of her times and putting in perspective the difficulties she faced. Part Two is headed Spirituality, tracing the central Ignatian model which Mary came experientially to know must be the pattern of her unique religious endeavour. This leads to reflections on spiritual discernment and radical trust in God, deepened as it is both tried and strengthened by circumstances and a growth in interior wisdom. Part Three is titled Theology and, under its first chapter 'Understanding Truth', explores Mary's deeply rooted, instinctive insight, her guiding light of 'veritie', or truth. There follows consideration of 'Women and the Church' and 'Evangelisation Today'. In particular, Christine Burke offers an incisive analysis of feminist issues – historical and theological – and the shifting ground these have traversed over recent decades. A deeper and more widely cogniscent stance is argued for. In the final segment on evangelisation today, there is much for every worker in whatever form of ministry to ponder.
Mary Ward was a woman whose adult life covered the first half of the 17th century, a time when in her native England families retaining the Catholic faith were liable to severe forms of legal oppression. Mary, like many others, sought to follow her religious vocation on the Continent, firstly as a Poor Clare and then, under her Jesuit inspiration, in an active teaching ministry. New teaching institutes of women, mostly Jesuit-influenced, were emerging at this time, but Mary's met with peculiar difficulties. She wished for full canonical status as a religious – legally contracted through solemn vows – but without the obligation, for women, of papal enclosure. This requirement had been re-emphasised at the Council of Trent only two years before Mary's birth, leading to refusal of approbation at this level. There were other complicating factors, stemming especially from circumstances in England, where her ministry there was felt by opponents as not only totally unsuitable to women but as jeopardising already hazardous situations. Difficulties in communication across Europe, where Mary Ward had already established a number of communities and schools, led to further misinterpretation and the Roman declaration that her institute be suppressed. Seeming disobedience to this edict led to Mary's imprisonment as a heretic until her release, with withdrawal of this charge, was decreed two months later by Urban VIII, who personally received her kindly in Rome.

However, her vision had to wait a later day. Her few communities which survived continued as simple-vowed (then regarded essentially as secular) groups of women, which a century later (1749) received a measure of papal recognition. This precedent helped to pave the way for the full canonical approbation of simple-vowed, non-enclosed female religious communities by the end of 19th century. It took this length of time for Mary herself to be formally recognised as foundress of her institute. She was indeed a pioneer, an ‘incomparable woman’ (Pius XII), as the unfolding of her story, with her spirituality and influence, reveals in the successive sections of this book.

**Reviewer:** Dr Rosa MacGinley PBVM, St Paul’s Theological College, Australian Catholic University, Brisbane.