

PLAYING WITHIN THE RULES

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MARY WARD'S ATTEMPT to found an order of women based on the Jesuit model is part of the long history of women's struggle to fulfil their God-given potential in society and to live their vocation within the Christian community. In society as a whole women have battled throughout history with male prejudice against their taking on social roles perceived as unsuitable. In the seventeenth century this prejudice was expressed within the Church as hierarchical resistance to women working outside monastic enclosure and without the control of male authorities. The unenclosed, self-governing religious life for women is now so familiar as to be unquestioned, but Mary Ward had a particularly testing vocation, given her vision, centuries before its time, of how women could serve God in a Church that rejected this same vision in God's name.

At the time of the Council of Trent new social contexts, new fields of mission, and above all the challenge represented by the Protestant Reformation proved the catalyst for novel forms of religious life to emerge, including the Society of Jesus. At the same time the Council confirmed the imposition of strict enclosure on all nuns begun by the constitution *Periculoso* (1298) of Boniface VIII. This rendered it impossible for female religious to undertake works of charity outside the monastic enclosure, with the strictly limited exception of the education of girls. Women religious were not permitted to organize themselves under a general superior or in a province of several houses. Pius V's constitution *Circa pastoralis* (1566) obliged tertiaries, who had previously been able to circumvent these restrictions, to take solemn vows and observe pontifical enclosure. Full approbation was not given to women attempting to live an apostolic life under simple vows until nearly three centuries later.

A number of early Jesuits involved in the reform of women's religious houses became enthusiastic about taking these convents under Jesuit jurisdiction, but this clashed with the concept of universal mission and mobility in the service of Christ that was of supreme importance to St

Ignatius. He himself had a wide spiritual correspondence with prominent women and never hesitated to enlist their support in promoting the welfare and apostolic ministries of his nascent order.¹ The early generation of Jesuits offered the Spiritual Exercises to women and trained them to be spiritual guides, in turn, to others. There are many instances of fruitful apostolic collaboration between Jesuits and female friends and companions, but this stopped short of the creation of a female branch of the order.

Two unfortunate episodes in his own life involving influential women made Ignatius determined to avoid such a development. Isabel Roser, a wealthy benefactor from Barcelona, resolved to make profession of vows in the Society of Jesus and successfully petitioned the Pope to oblige Ignatius to accept her wish. Difficulties soon arose, culminating in accusations that he had misappropriated the widow's goods. After a court hearing resolved the case in Ignatius' favour, he successfully appealed



Juana of Austria, by Sofonisba Anguissola

to have Isabel's vows commuted to vows of obedience to the diocesan bishop, and to free the Jesuits in perpetuity from the spiritual direction of any women living together in community and wishing to place themselves under obedience to the Society. Juana of Austria, the sister of Philip II of Spain, also determined to live as a Jesuit. Ignatius had no option but to admit her, though in the strictest secrecy, and under the codename of 'Mateo Sánchez'. Juana was the only female in history to have become a member of the Society of Jesus under permanent vows.²

¹ Cándido de Dalmases, *Ignatius of Loyola: Founder of the Jesuits, His Life and Work* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985), 88.

² See *Saint Ignatius Loyola: Letters to Women*, edited by Hugo Rahner (Edinburgh and London: Nelson, 1950), 52–67.

Mary Ward belonged to an extended network of recusant women in Elizabethan England who became familiar with the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises through the ministry of itinerant Jesuits. In the absence of established Roman Catholic clergy or hierarchy many assumed positions of religious leadership at home—or in prison—following a life of common prayer and religious instruction. Outside the prisons it was often less risky for Jesuits and other priests to seek the collaboration of women than of men, and a generation of women emerged who, at great risk to themselves, lived at the service of the Church while not being professed religious.³

At fifteen, Mary determined to become a nun but, convinced that ‘women did not know how to do good except to themselves’, she entered the order of Poor Clares in Flanders. She subsequently came to understand that God was calling her, not to the cloister but to a way of life as yet unimagined.⁴ Returning to London, she began doing apostolic work and gathered a group of like-minded companions who set sail together for St Omer in 1609. But their inability to clarify what sort of religious life they were to embark upon led to painful difficulties.

In 1611 Mary received an intellectual understanding that she and her companions were to,

Take the Same of the Society, soe understood, as that we were to take the same both in matter and manner, that onely excepted which God by diversity of Sex hath prohibited.⁵

They took this to mean that, while remaining autonomous, they were take the Jesuit *Constitutions* for their own, and live a religious life as close to that of the Jesuits as was possible for women. This brought them into direct conflict with the Council of Trent and the Jesuits themselves; and Mary’s decision to use the name ‘Society of Jesus’, as female Carmelites or Benedictines used the same name as their male counterparts, gave rise to further objections.

My Confessor resisted, all the Society opposed; diverse Institutes were drawne by severall persons These were ... pressed upon us; there

³ See *The Other Face: Catholic Life under Elizabeth I*, edited by Philip Caraman (London: Longmans, 1960), 135, 198–203, and Jennifer Cameron, *A Dangerous Innovator: Mary Ward (1585–1645)* (Strathfield: St Paul’s, 2000), 14–18, 75–76.

⁴ Mary Ward, ‘The Italian Autobiography’, in *Mary Ward (1585–1645): A Briefe Relation ... with Autobiographical Fragments and a Selection of Letters*, edited by Christina Kenworthy-Browne (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2008), 122.

⁵ Mary Ward to Antonio Albergati, May/June 1621, in *Mary Ward (1585–1645)*, 146.

was noe remedy but refuse them, which caused infinitt troubles, then would they needs, that at least we should take the name of some order confirmed, or some new one, or any we could think of, soe not that of Jesus: This the Fathers of the Society urged exceedingly (and doe still every day [more] then other), telling us that to any such name we may take what Constitutions we will, even theres in substance, if otherwise we will not be satisfied, but by noe means will they that we observe that forme which there Constitutions and rules are writt in⁶

Mary was convinced that women as well as men were called to the apostolic life, capable of responding to God in a 'a singular freedome ... intyre applycation, and apte dispoision to all good works'.⁷ By 1616 communities under her authority had multiplied across Europe. Their apostolic aims had spread from the education of girls to 'the salvation of our neighbour ... by any other means that are congruous to the times'.⁸ Mary presented her plan to the Pope, stressing the Ignatian characteristics of freedom from enclosure, from monastic practices and dress, and from episcopal authority. Some Jesuits who had experience of women's apostolic potential from the English mission supported Mary Ward's 'English Ladies', sometimes referred to as 'Jesuitesses'. Others, including the Jesuit Superior General, Muzio Vitelleschi, who was otherwise kind and personally supportive of Mary herself, were immovably opposed.⁹ Enemies nicknamed the sisters 'Galloping Girls', accusing them of immorality, financial irregularity and usurping priestly functions.¹⁰

Years of apostolic experience convinced Mary not only of the aptness of women for the Jesuit way of life, but also of their fundamental equality with men before God, a theological insight not universally shared at the time. Deciding to plead her cause to the Pope in person, she set out in 1621 on foot across the Alps, braving the war between France and Savoy, plague and treacherous conditions. Appealing to social changes and to her sisters' own experience, she argued the need for a new form of

⁶ Mary Ward to Antonio Albergati, May/June 1621, 146.

⁷ Mary Ward to Roger Lee, 1 November 1615, in *Mary Ward und ihre Gründung: Die Quellentexte bis 1645*, edited by Ursula Dirmeier (Münster: Aschendorff, 2007), 290.

⁸ Mary Ward, *Ratio instituti* (1615), translation in Mary Catherine Elizabeth Chambers, *The Life of Mary Ward*, edited by Henry James Coleridge, 2 volumes (London: Burns and Oates, 1882/1885), volume 1, 377.

⁹ Cameron, *A Dangerous Innovator*, 123–124, and Henriette Peters, *Mary Ward: a World in Contemplation*, translated by Helen Butterworth (Leominster: Gracewing, 1994), 326, 408, 485, 522.

¹⁰ *Till God Will: Mary Ward through her Writings*, edited by M. Emmanuel Orchard (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 48–50, 69; Cameron, *A Dangerous Innovator*, 118–123. Mary Ward, described as 'vergine d'animo virile', was accused of behaving like a priest, driving round Europe in a carriage and pretending to be a duchess *incognita*. See Peters, *Mary Ward*, 468–469.



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'She was given to discern when and by whom the Institute would be confirmed', from the Painted Life of Mary Ward

religious life for women.¹¹ But her appeals were ignored. Communities were systematically closed, and in 1631 Mary was arrested and imprisoned on a charge of heresy, schism and rebellion against the Church.¹²

The ensuing Bull of suppression of her congregation destroyed any hope of establishing an order of unenclosed women religious in imitation of the Jesuits. The extreme violence of its language exhibits a deep-seated hostility to any attempt by women to transcend the social and theological boundaries imposed on them by the Church.¹³ In time the remaining 'Jesuitesses' gathered into houses in Munich, Rome and York. Mary herself died at York in 1645, during the English Civil War, her life's work apparently destroyed.¹⁴

The 'poisonous growths in the church of God' had been torn up by the roots, as the Bull demanded, but their extinction was not achieved. The handful of survivors became a network of apostolic women inspired by the Jesuit charism, dedicated to female education and devoted to the

¹¹ Peters, *Mary Ward*, 332.

¹² Peters, *Mary Ward*, 569, and M. Immolata Wetter, *Mary Ward under the Shadow of the Inquisition*, translated by Bernadette Ganne and Patricia Harriss (Oxford: Way Books, 2006), 74.

¹³ Wetter, *Mary Ward under the Shadow of the Inquisition*, 129–140, 213–218, and Peters, *Mary Ward*, 566.

¹⁴ Wetter, *Mary Ward under the Shadow of the Inquisition*, 164–173; *Till God Will*, 115–119.

disgraced founder.¹⁵ Communities spread across Europe, and in 1749 Benedict XIV's apostolic constitution *Quamvis justo* conceded a measure of papal approval—but her sisters were required to deny that Mary Ward was the founder of their permitted 'new' institute.¹⁶

Among some her memory and founding dream remained strong, and in the nineteenth century Frances Teresa Ball made her novitiate at the Bar Convent in York, and returned to her native Ireland to found a second branch of the order, known as the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary or Loreto Sisters. This spread across continents and a third, North American, branch was established.¹⁷ Mary Ward's final rehabilitation by the Church and the confirmation of her order came about in 1909 through a coalition of support from Jesuits and other clergy in collaboration with sisters of all three branches.¹⁸ In 1979 and 1983 respectively, the oldest two branches of the IBVM adopted edited forms of the Jesuit *Constitutions*.¹⁹ Changes in Canon Law encouraged the first branch to adopt the fullest possible text, including the Jesuit Fourth Vow of universal mission, in 2004.²⁰ With this came a change of name. Mary Ward had styled her group 'Mothers of the Society of Jesus', believing that God wished the name of Jesus to be included in their title.²¹ In a compromise which both honoured this wish and the autonomy of the Jesuits, the name of the first branch changed to Congregation of Jesus. Nearly four hundred years after the first foundation in St Omer, Mary's dream was achieved in full. Today all over the world her sisters continue, through educational, social, pastoral and spiritual ministries, to live as contemplatives in action, in the spirit of Ignatius of Loyola.²²

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¹⁵ Cameron, *A Dangerous Innovator*, 157–161.

¹⁶ Cameron, *A Dangerous Innovator*, 203–205. Mary Wright, *Mary Ward's Institute: The Struggle for Identity* (Sydney: Crossing, 1997), 43–86, 196–213. See also Wetter, *Mary Ward under the Shadow of the Inquisition*, 196–198.

¹⁷ Wetter, *Mary Ward under the Shadow of the Inquisition*, 199–203. The North American and Irish branches amalgamated in 2002.

¹⁸ Wetter, *Mary Ward under the Shadow of the Inquisition*, 203–211.

¹⁹ Cameron, *A Dangerous Innovator*, 161–162.

²⁰ A remarkable concession, given that not all Jesuits are permitted to take it.

²¹ See Peters, *Mary Ward*, 488. And compare *Formula of the Institute*, n. 3.

²² For more information see my fuller discussion, 'Women Jesuits?' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits*, edited by Thomas Worcester (Cambridge: CUP, 2008), 120–135.