

MARY WARD: WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

By JOAN D. CHITTISTER

MARY WARD SAID, 'I hope in God it will be seen that women in time to come will do much'. The psalmist said, 'How long, O God, will you cast us off? . . . We have no one to tell us, nor have we a prophet to say how long this suffering will last'. For a woman of the twentieth century to read the life of seventeenth-century Mary Ward is to know the depth of the lament. For women over the centuries, little has changed. The forces arrayed against the participation of women in pastoral ministry which resisted Mary Ward resist women still. The ideas and attitudes that branded women as inferior, as 'but women', persist yet. The proscriptions against the autonomy, independence and equality of women which made Mary Ward's insights heresy, which condemned her to ecclesiastical prison and suppressed the religious group she founded, exist still. In some places, certainly, as in Mary Ward's time, some women enjoy a basically free environment. But nowhere are women actually equal, either in Church or society, and everywhere male systems define, restrict and exclude women from their inner sanctums where deals are cut and decisions are made, even about them. Mary Ward, however, stands upright in history to refute all of this. In the face of the greatest lie of life, that women are inferior, inept, and incomplete both in nature and in grace, Mary Ward indeed brings 'verity'.

Mary Ward had convictions that confronted the given wisdom of the age about the basic nature of women. One author calls the ideas 'dangerously novel for her time'. The problem, unfortunately, is that the ideas may be dangerously novel for our time as well. The important thing is that they demand consideration, they give hope, yet today.

Women and grace

Mary Ward believed firmly that women were as capable of grace as men. Fervour, she argued, despite the opposition of churchmen of the period, was a feminine strength as well as a male prerogative. But the implications of the position were ominous. If women were capable of finding God and maintaining their spiritual commitment

without the guidance of a male, then the structures that mirrored that kind of theology were endangered. The notion that spiritual perfection was possible for women struck at the roots of a system that pronounced women inherently weak, and automatically put women under male spiritual directors and directly obedient to the chaplains and vicars and local bishops into whose care and jurisdiction they were given because, as one priest told her, 'women could not apprehend God'.

Consequently, men wrote the Constitutions of religious orders; men conducted the canonical visitation of convents; men directed the internal affairs of women's groups; only male members of an order qualified to participate in the General Chapters or legislative assemblies of that order. The spiritual immaturity of women was, in fact, the given upon which the entire system was based. To argue for the spiritual adulthood of women was, someone surely knew, to threaten the spiritual paternalism of the male Church and to endorse the possibility of spiritual leadership in women, a concept that is only now coming into sharper focus as women have begun to do theology and to go to other women for spiritual direction and theological education.

Women as bearers of the faith

Mary Ward clearly believed that women were called to teach the faith. Her argument is a compelling one even in our own day. 'If women were so inferior to men in all things,' she reasons, 'why were they not exempted in all things as they are in some?' Why, in other words, admit that they can do anything at all? If women are naturally deficient in some things, naturally excluded from some areas, aren't they really inadequate in all? Yet some things are required of them: 'Hath not God appointed and commanded his apostles and others to preach? God's words are not in vain . . . besides, you know, there are pardons to any that in any sort shall teach or instruct. This is granted to all, as well to women as to men . . .' It is true that in the seventeenth century she did not question the submission of wives to husbands, or the role of men in the sacramental system, or the 'preaching of the faith in public churches', but she simply calls 'an error' the notion that women cannot conduct their own spiritual lives, or learn, or teach. Inequity itself she unmasked as proof of equality. Either women could do nothing and so should be exempted from responsibility for anything, or women were also able to give spiritual leadership and so should be exempted from nothing. In our own time, the question of exemption from some things but not from others, of having all of the responsibilities but only some of the rights of baptism is

becoming increasingly more evident and increasingly more serious. Women are said to be able to teach but not to preach; to pray for others but not to bless them; to counsel sinners but not to forgive them. If these insights of Mary Ward's are to continue to be ignored, then the whole theology of baptism, incarnation and eucharist must be rethought.

Women and perfection

Mary Ward was intent on the fact that women could be perfect as well as men. In fact, Mary Ward contested the notion that men were by nature superior to women. 'If we look upon men as prophets, we shall see their imperfections, but if we look upon them as men, we shall see them far otherwise. You may know them by the fruits of their counsels', she instructed her sisters. The teaching was a revolutionary one: men are not unusually graced creatures; they are human just as women are. Learn to discriminate in what they tell you and you will not be either misled or disillusioned. Obviously, when their counsels meant the derogation of women and the diminishment of the quality of their creation there was in Mary Ward's mind no truth, no profit, no praise of God, no *veritas Domini* in that.

The tension, of course, lies in the fact that to this day the inference is that women cannot possibly be as perfect as men. Otherwise, how account for the fact that all the truths of the faith are discerned and defined by men only? How argue the fact that women are not permitted to teach in seminaries except that no woman can possibly have anything to say to a man about God? How justify the notion that men can be ordained permanent deacons but women cannot when, as a matter of fact, women may, by special injunction at least, do everything of substance that deacons can do: distribute the Eucharist, baptize, preach, administer a parish? What is the continuing imperfection upon which this exclusion is based and how is it to be explained, especially in view of centuries of deaconesses in both the Eastern and Western Church? In the words of Mary Ward, 'It is certain God has looked upon you as he never looked upon any . . . Not better, not in a greater or more excellent manner, nor with more love . . . but as he never looked upon any'. God, perhaps, but not men.

Women, faith and feminism

Mary Ward saw commitment to feminism as a sanctifying concept and an eternal truth. Convinced that her insights about women were from God, she accepted as her spiritual duty the

moral obligation to proclaim them, despite almost fanatical opposition from those clerics and cardinals alike who considered nuns without cloister, choir, habits, and direct male control as heretics. In several of the speeches to her sisters she repeats insistently her disagreement with the Father Minister who insisted that women could not maintain the fervour of their religious commitment without men. 'With respect to the good Father, I must still say, that it is not truth but a lie to say that fervour must necessarily decay, and that we are "but women" . . . He may have much knowledge, and perhaps he hath all other knowledge and I have only this knowledge and the light of this only verity, by which perhaps, I must be saved'.

For Mary Ward in the seventeenth century and for many christian feminists in the twentieth, it is the gospel itself that compels that sexism must be confronted wherever it is if the Church is to be credible. Insight into the truths of God was the essence of 'verity' to Mary Ward. Much in the temper of evangelist Mary Dyer years later who said, 'Truth is my authority; not authority my truth', Mary Ward pressed beyond the conventions of the system to the centre of the vision.

Women, faith and dependence

Mary Ward made distinctions about dependence that tap both the best and worst of catholic theology. Either women too, have consciences and must follow them, or they do not and therefore cannot be bound to them. Mary Ward, in other words, wanted women to be dependent but she did not want dependent women. She wanted women whose dependence was on God and who therefore were empowered by 'verity', not made powerless in the name of God. Independence, she felt, was essential for women. In a case study of a convent that failed she blames the failure not on the fact that the women lost contact with the fathers of the Society or because they were women, but 'because they placed their affections more in the esteem of those men that for the present guided them than in this verity which is only God'. The point is, of course, that the women went astray because they never took charge of their own lives in the first place; that they made the men who were over them their gods; that they had given their consciences away.

More, she understood that true dependence differed from control. 'I beseech you all', she wrote, 'for God's love, to love verity and true dependence and not to adhere to the Superior, to this Father or this creature for affection, so that if they are lost, all is lost'. The concept is a dangerous one. It leads to decision-making;

it leads to personal responsibility; it precludes blind obedience; it makes God the ultimate norm of every action and puts women in charge of their own actions. It is the kind of philosophy of creation that shakes the foundations of hierarchical systems. And it was not accepted; neither then in Mary Ward nor now in the new forms of government that have emerged in religious life for women since Vatican II. The problem is that women believe that Mary Ward was right, that the rights and responsibilities of women must be recognized and accepted if the Church is ever to be a whole Church. She wrote with bold clarity: 'heretofore we have been told by men we must believe (and) 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'.

Women and self-definition

Of all of her perceptions, the keenest may be Mary Ward's awareness of the effect of male definitions of womanhood on the development of women. She simply tells her sisters to pay no attention to them: 'You may know them by the fruits of their counsels . . . for what can this profit you, to tell you that you are but women, weak and able to do nothing, and that fervour [commitment? stability? spiritual development?] will decay'.

The problem is not a small one. That the definition of women by men is limiting and false is difficult enough. The effects of these very definitions on the development of women are even worse. If psychology has taught us nothing else, it is at least clear now that the oppressed internalize the message of the oppressor; that people live down to their stunted expectations. Inferiority, in other words, is learned from the standard setters of a society whose access to the schools and courts and legislatures of a people have the power to define the rights of others. It is precisely about the nature and possibilities of women that women must educate the Church, or humanity may never come to know the fullness of God's creation. If women had no other ministry than this, the world and the Church would be different tomorrow.

Women and self-development

Mary Ward loved both learning and knowledge but learning, she knew, could corrupt knowledge. There were, as a matter of fact, things for women to unlearn. And that could be done only by knowledge. 'The verity of our Lord . . . not the verity of men, nor the verity of women'. It was ultimate truth that Mary Ward sought for her sisters and instructed them to seek. Women may be perfect as well as men, she argued, 'if they love verity and seek

true knowledge'. It was lack of 'true knowledge' that made actions which otherwise looked good 'to be unseemly'. Mary Ward asks women to look beyond the mind of men into the mind of God. She was asking for speculation and contemplation and reason of the highest degree from women. She expected it.

I entreat you to love and seek truth and the knowledge it brings you unto, for the end which it brings you unto is God . . . It is want of knowledge or want of true consideration of God which is the end of knowledge that we fear, not the words of greatness, not of princes or any other things besides God.

Mary Ward asks women to be all they can be, regardless of who says they cannot. And Mary Ward paid the price of her knowledge of God's creating will for women, as do women today who seek to direct their lives and contact their God without male control or male consecration.

Women and the development of ministry

Mary Ward gave her life to the development of this new life-style and service of women. It was 'knowledge and verity' which impelled her. She knew, however, that real reasons are not always acceptable reasons for doing something and cautioned her sisters that exactly their love of their company or institute would be the very thing that would lead them to lie, to give one reason or explanation or defence of a thing when they really knew it was another.

To bring others to know truth, you must lie. I mean you must say that which is not verity and that which you know is not truth, because if you speak truth to them, they will not understand it. Verily, it is a pitiful thing that to bring others to truth, we must speak that which is not verity, and which we know is not truth.

The circumstance continues. Whatever women do must look like an accident rather than a call, an expectation, a birthright. Women are given parishes to administer because 'there is no one else to do it'. Women are given the Eucharist to carry 'because there is no one else to carry it'. Women are given pastoral programmes to direct 'because no one else is qualified'. But women are given none of these things for the real reason: they are baptized; they are committed; they are human; they have been given gifts by God that must be used in the name of God.

Women and spiritual leadership

Mary Ward understood her opposition well. She knew that men considered them radicals, 'new beginners of a course never thought of before'. She knew that the expectation was that they would fail and not be able to 'bring to pass things beyond the compass of such weak creatures as they have ever esteemed women to be, who expect to see our fervour decay and all come to nothing, ourselves to shame and confusion'. But she knew too that there were others who looked upon them 'with another conceit, expecting all the world to be bettered by us'.

Through it all she persisted. Through the local investigations and complaints, through the accusations and disapproval, through the examination by the Congregation of Cardinals, through the suppression of the Institute, through the house-arrest in the convent in Anger. So strong was her faith that women, too, were created in the image of God and that women were no lesser creatures than men that she laid down her own life to release the lives and gifts of other women.

But in 1985, though some gains have definitely been made for some women—in education, in legal rights, in social inclusion, in theological developments and pastoral participation—nevertheless most of the poor, most of the hungry, most of the disenfranchised of the world are still women; all of the authorities of the Church are still men and the laws still prescribe cloisters, choirs, habits and male approval of women's religious groups. Women are still considered inadequate to contact God sacramentally. In 1985 Mary Ward still speaks to us all about how to minister to our own times.

Women must know their own worth and instill that worth in other women, Mary Ward instructs. Women must seek and speak eternal truth regardless of the lesser truths that bind. Women must develop their own spirituality, independently of male mentors, and hold fast to it because other spiritualities are derogations of women. Women must claim equality in the face of inequity. Women must be 'truly dependent' and so independent of everything that is not of God. Women must see themselves as entrusted with the gospel and preach it. Women must listen to women. Women must see commitment to the full development of women as a moral and therefore a sanctifying obligation. Women must be steadfast in their commitment. Women must not fear to speak their truth to the great and the princely 'to effect or bring to pass whatever is necessary'.

Indeed, she taught, women had special gifts to bring to ministry and men were not infallible in regard to the development of women.

Mary Ward's sense of woman was a searing truth in the heart of the Church and in the hearts of the women as well who persisted over time in the ideals of this prophet. So certain was she of the truth of her being that her most poignant insight into the power of creation within her may well be her declaration:

I confess that if there were not God, or if I did not do what I do for him, that which I find within myself were sufficient to make me do all I do or shall do. And indeed in that I am unsatisfied because I know not from wherever this proceeds, though I hope, well.

Mary Ward did not prevail, except in part. The theology of limitation is the catechism on women to this day. But Mary Ward does raise both questions and models that will not die. Does God value women as much as Mary Ward did? And if so, why does not the male Church?

The answer given to women about the strictures on their gifts, when all other answers intellectual and biological and social have been given the lie, has always been 'tradition'. But the real issue for our time is *why* is this the tradition? Is the exclusion of women from the administrative, sacramental life of the Church because it was not supposed to be or because no one would allow it to be? And is not the continual re-emergence of great women who do great things that great men say may not be done by women also part of the tradition? The question is why do we never legitimate that part of the tradition? Mary Ward already had the answer. She wrote: 'I would to God that all men understood this verity, that women, if they will, may 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'.

It is four hundred years later. The spiritual leadership of women depends yet on the witness, the verity, of courageous women. It depends as well on the honesty of conscientious men who will call their own systems to the gospel truth. Or as a contemporary feminist said, 'If you don't risk anything, you risk even more'.