

MARY WARD: FRIENDSHIP AND SPIRITUAL MINISTRY

By MARGARET HONNER

FRIENDSHIP AND SPIRITUAL conversation provided the human beginning of Mary Ward's religious vocation. It was through her association with Margaret Garrett, an old servant in the home of the Babthorpes where she was staying as a young girl, that she was inspired by stories of religious life and filled with the 'desire never to love any but Him'.¹ Such a desire was not the end of human affection but rather the deep source of a love which shared in Christ's redemptive love and showed itself in the whole range of loving human relationships that can be called friendship.

Her first response to her vocation was to seek out that order which combined the most austerity with the strictest observance of enclosure, a wholehearted response in which there may be some reflection of her natural reserve and predilection for quiet as well as her generosity. However, her own words indicate how much such a choice was determined by the contemporary understanding of religious life for women: 'as women did not know how to do good except to themselves (a penuriousness which I resented enough even then) I would do in earnest what I did'.² The alternative, an apostolic religious life, seemed even then a greater but unattainable good,

which, if it could have been I valued above all, though I found a far more sensible content in solitude and abstraction from the world, and therefore never so much as thought of that other, (in way of practice) till God (as I trust) called me unto it, in manner against my will.³

The manner of that calling, and her long endeavour to know and do the will of him who called her to help her neighbour, are the ground from which emerged her emphasis on the apostolate of the Word with all its implications for human communication and friendship.

In the uncertain period which immediately followed her departure from the Poor Clares, Mary returned to England 'to do all

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the little I could for God and the good of those there'.⁴ It sounds simple enough, but the particular situation in post-reformation England called for a new kind of good work, not the corporal works of mercy, but the spiritual work of speaking the Word in familiar and friendly conversation. Where Catholics were largely deprived of leadership and communal support, where they had very limited access to sacraments and scripture and where they were constantly spied on, betrayed and persecuted, the importance of mutual encouragement in the faith cannot be overestimated. Despite the considerable dangers involved, Mary's zeal and charity led her into a whole range of situations where the effect of her personal impact was to build up and strengthen the faith of others.

Several early sources, particularly *The Painted Life*⁵ and the *Briefe Relation*⁶ provide information on the scope and nature of her activities at this time. She visited the sick—and converted obstinate heretics on their deathbeds through her 'friendly words'.⁷ She dined with people—and, in her own words, many 'now living holily in various religious orders say that they left the world in great part through my conversation'.⁸ She visited prisons to encourage and strengthen in their perseverance those imprisoned for their faith. She disguised herself as a maid to have easier access to certain people and by her 'gift of persuasion'⁹ brought them back to the practice of their faith. She encouraged people to go to confession and then saw to the difficult and extremely dangerous task of arranging contact with a priest. It was selfless and courageous work, motivated by a great love of God and a genuine love of neighbour. While Mary's primary concern was for the faith, that deepest well-being of her neighbour, the full human quality of her response to each individual was the very key to her effectiveness. There was an integrity in what she said and did that was itself persuasive.

The *Briefe Relation* describes the effect of her goodness as:

agreeable to all, not in a manner to startle or amaze one, but as if God would by her make appeare the lovelynes of vertue, with the force of sweetnes of it, and as if by her his devine designe was to draw many to himselfe their finall end, not with violence or strife, but as an apparent and satisfying truth.¹⁰

It is not surprising, then, that at the end of this period companions gathered around her, despite the fact that these young women had to leave their homeland as well as their homes with no clear sense of the direction of their lives. All they had was a shared belief that they were called by God to follow Mary not in some enclosed

order but 'in some more excellent state which would do far more to promote the glory of God'.¹¹ Nor is it as surprising in hindsight, as it certainly was to her contemporaries, that Mary should eventually be led by God to model her Institute on the Society of Jesus, since the work she had been doing in England exactly paralleled the simple and friendly conversations about spiritual things which were the chief apostolic ministry of St Ignatius and his early companions.

The final expression of what Mary wanted for her Institute was closely modelled on the *Formula of the Institute* of St Ignatius, clearly stating its main purpose as care of the faith. However, her outline of the means to attain this end differs significantly from the ignatian text. Understandably, she leaves public sermons and the administration of sacraments for the priests but retains 'any other ministrations whatever of the Word of God, including the Spiritual Exercises'.¹² The examples listed tend to presume a one-to-one starting point—for example: 'seeking out women of dissolute lives and preparing them to receive grace through the sacraments'.¹³ The recurring patterns of seeking out, bringing together and preparing people for sermons, sacraments and spiritual consolation is the pattern of human contact leading to spiritual growth. It is the pattern that Mary Ward learnt in England where the only structures remaining to the Church were the networks of families and friends and where the apostolate, of necessity, took the shape of friendship. Nor was that any disguise: real friendship, the friendship of Jesus and his disciples, was the essence of this apostolate. It was not, therefore, limited to the English scene, though providentially the exigencies of that situation had produced it. On the continent as well, every ordinary human contact was the starting point for the communication of the Word.

The work of educating girls was an integral part of such an apostolate. All over Europe, the challenges of heresy and the related political and economic pressures threatened the destruction of the social units which had been bulwarks of the faith. Women, with their immense influence for good in the family and in the household as the centre of social life, needed a sound Catholic education to meet the challenges of their time. It was not sufficient for them to gain a groundwork in devout practices by spending their school years in a cloistered environment. They needed precisely that education which was 'most suitable for the common good of the Church and their own particular good whether they choose to spend their lives in the world or in the religious state'.¹⁴ In thus putting forward education as a means for her Institute to attain its end (the care of the faith), Mary Ward quite clearly intends

that her schools would produce apostles. For this purpose she laboured to keep her own nuns uncloistered, mobile, resilient and as zealous as apostles, while steadfastly maintaining their contemplative openness to God. The high standards she required of her nuns as teachers, and of each student, according to capacity, were for the sake of the kingdom. Consequently, the quality of the religious education was such that her enemies accused her nuns of presuming to teach theology (and to girls!). Similarly, the importance of the liberal arts, and of languages in particular, in the education of one who was to engage in the human communication of the Word cannot be overestimated. The Institute set up a variety of schools, catering for noble (but increasingly impoverished) english girls, for the daughters of the citizens, rich and poor, of the cities of Europe, for boarders and day scholars, little children and young women. Some of the italian schools were specifically geared to providing the girls with skills for employment other than prostitution ('the wicked sayd if this went on, the stewes in Rome would fayle').¹⁵ More generally, however, the schools were trying to produce women who were capable of living and sharing their faith in whatever walk of life.

Apt for friendship

Mary Ward's own extraordinary gift for friendship bears witness to the potential effectiveness of such an education:

She was a great enemy of Ignorance . . . She was wont to say she could not find out a reason, why knowledge should be damageable but many that it might be advantageous . . . Her soul and mind thus richly adorned, rendered her conversation most profitable and pleasing, and was cause that a great devine and Person of extraordinary breeding and birth was wont to say, he never made visit to her but he returned with encrease of knowledge both divine and humaine.¹⁶

A remarkably wide range of people genuinely enjoyed and valued her company. It is of the essence of her gift for friendship that they also profited by it. In appreciating her goodness, they were drawn closer to the author of all goodness. For above all else, Mary's entire disposition was to 'be wholly God's'.¹⁷ It was the integrating factor in her life and the source of her inner freedom, her selflessness and her serenity. With this wholeness, which was partly a gift of nature and grace, partly the fruit of prayer and penance, she was able to give herself fully to whatever task was at hand and to each person she was dealing with. She did nothing in

a divided manner but was 'whole in her labours, whole to herself, and whole to her neighbour. Great in her faith, and faithfull in her searche to know all that God would have of her and by her'.¹⁸

One of the first and most steadfast of Mary's friends in this search was the Franciscan, Bishop Blaise of St Omer. He had followed her departure from the walloon Poor Clares, worked closely with her in the establishment of the new Poor Clare foundation at Gravelines, witnessed her second departure from the convent and the public derision that followed. When the 'runaway nun'¹⁹ returned to his diocese with her young companions to open a school, he welcomed them and gave them every encouragement. In 1615, when the controversy over their way of life mounted, he responded to the threat of scandal with a pastoral letter in their defence (which mentions, among other points, the fact that they 'profit others by their good example and godly conversation').²⁰ His letters of commendation accompanied the first plan of the Institute Mary sent to Pope Paul V and it was to his care and protection that the pope, in reply, committed the Institute. The affectionate gratitude with which he is mentioned in the *Briefve Relation*²¹ is an indication of the way he fulfilled this responsibility and of the real friendship and mutual appreciation which existed between himself and Mary with her first companions.

Fr Roger Lee S.J., Mary's spiritual director during those most difficult years of her life, the years of uncertainty about what God wanted, had more knowledge of her interior life as well as her exterior works. It was always Mary's practice in dealing with her director to speak 'with all sincerity, without any reserve',²² and despite a certain lack of understanding on his part over her leaving the Poor Clares and a more marked lack of enthusiasm over her desire to 'take the same of the Society',²³ Mary counted his direction as one of the great graces of her life. It is recorded that, at one stage, she feared that she loved him too much and considered giving him up, but God gave her to understand quite clearly 'it is not thou, but I who chose him for thee'.²⁴ Mary's last letter to Father Lee, conscious of the possibility of his imminent death, is a beautiful expression of her gratitude for her 'security in following your direction, which is the greatest content touching myself and all I have to do, which I have in this life (next to H. Communion receiving)'.²⁵

Bishop Blaise and Father Lee came close to Mary through the exercise of their own vocation. They shared her goals and appreciated, from their close knowledge of her, the humility and integrity with which she pursued them. Of these holy men and others like them 'she would say many times, God had regard to redress her

wants, by moving holy servants of his to love her, but others concluded that like loved their like'.²⁶ The affection and appreciation were reciprocal, Mary's response being particularly characterized by gratitude and loyalty, as her own words suggest: 'Let thy love be at all times rooted in God and then remain faithful to thy friend and value him highly, even more highly than thy life'.²⁷

Mary understood clearly that her Institute's 'prosperity, progress and security did not depend upon wealth, dignity and favour of princes' but on all its members having 'free and open access to Him from whom proceed all strength, light and protection'.²⁸ Through the long years of trying to get approval for her Institute in the face of ecclesiastical and political intrigue, the grace of this insight gave her strength and fidelity. Yet when one looks at the biographies, the number of influential people among Mary's personal friends is striking. One such was the Archduchess Isabella, daughter of Philip II of Spain. Her support of Mary in the foundation of the Poor Clare convent at Gravelines was to be expected in a devout and benevolent ruler. Her support of Mary in later years, however, when her nuns and her work were without formal approbation, when criticism and misunderstanding of her ideas and way of life abounded, was a mark of personal esteem and friendship. We read in the *Briefe Relation*, for example, that when Mary set out for Rome in 1621:

At her taking leave the Archduchess Isabella Clare Eugenia, who had given so many proofes of her love and esteem of her [including generous donations and letters of introduction] intreated her not to goe to Rome in her owne cloathes, for such was the malice borne her, as her life would be insecure'.²⁹

Her entreaties were successful—Mary put on the dress of a pilgrim—and one of the few stops Mary made on that incredible journey was to write letters, including one to Isabella. Mary made other friends as powerful as Isabella, such as the Elector Maximilian of Bavaria and his wife Elizabeth, and the Archduke and Archduchess of Austria. Through her schools Mary no doubt offered these catholic rulers a means of strengthening their position against the inroads of heresy and all its political repercussions, but the appreciation obviously went deeper than that. Mary's own company and friendship were valued by these people. Her genteel upbringing alone would not have enabled her to move so easily in these courtly circles. Her graciousness and pleasing manner were rather the external expression of her inner freedom, her singleness of purpose and her essential integrity.

Not all Mary's friends were from the higher echelons of society. In fact, she made friends wherever she went, with a generous love that was 'all things to all people' (1 Cor 9,22). Her terrible mid-winter journey across the Alps in 1626, for example, brought her to the little town of Feldkirch on Christmas Eve. She spent nearly the whole night in the church and yet, despite weariness, ill-health and her own worries about the Institute, obviously made welcome a stream of visitors the next day. The *Briefe Relation* tells us that:

one would call the other to goe and see her, each finding what suited and agreed with them, yet she allwayes the same without the least appearance of faining or force to comply with any.³⁰

She did not have to make any pretence to please these ordinary townfolk. Her genuine response, like the redemptive love of Christ, was to reach out to each individual:

There was nothing she did seem to have more horroure of then that there should be anything in herselfe or hers, that might putt a barre to the free accesse of who should be needy of ought in their power.³¹

The same genuine love was evident in Mary's dealing with the poor, 'were it by conversing with them her serving them or speaking of them. All which was done with greatest affection, esteeme and satisfaction'.³² She knew from her time with the Poor Clares what it was to be a beggar, she had taken on the role of servant on several occasions, she had opened schools for the poor in every town where her nuns had a house, she had called her filthy prison cell a palace and she lived with her nuns a life that was not just austere but often desperately poor. No mere words but a whole lifetime of deeds speaking louder than words is summed up in her epitaph: 'To love the poore/ persever in the same/ live dy and rise with/ them was all the ayme/ of/ Mary Ward . . .'³³

For all her greatheartedness, goodness and gifts of relating to others, Mary had many enemies. Opposition to her new concept of religious life for women was complicated by the conflict between the secular clergy and the Jesuits in England. As well, and more painful, the strain of living so long without approbation was too much for some members of the Institute who blamed Mary for her refusal to compromise. For her part, however, she had in 1625

received from Our Lord so much light and knowledge regarding the forgiveness of enemies, that henceforth she cherished a tender

affection for all who wronged her and was in the habit of calling them friends and lovers of her heavenly reward.³⁴

When letters became too dangerous to send except in code, Mary's opponents (who were powerful enough to have her imprisoned by the Inquisition as a heretic) were consequently referred to as 'Jerusalems'. Again, this genuinely christian affection was not merely a matter of pious words. It was a vigorous and positive love expressed in deeds. We read in the *Briefe Relation* of the prayer and penance she undertook on behalf of bitter enemies who were seriously ill and of her regular practice of offering 'every weeke one day her communion and all she did for her ennemys'.³⁵ There is also an account of her way of moving towards reconciliation:

When she had received any injury, it was her special care first to frame in herself an entire pardon, grounded and hartly, not formall and verball, then to pray for them and seeke out occasion to render them service, and this with efficacy but not without prudence, knowing and avoyding the effect of their ill will and malice as also to discerne what in them was good, and what badd.

The writers, her close companions, go straight on to say 'Alas well may we put downe a few words, but never come near to expresse the effacacy of the actions, which were with a perfect sight and knowledge, freedom and integrity'.³⁶

Freedom, justice, sincerity

Many of the gifts evident in these examples of Mary Ward's friendships are clearly related to the fundamental qualities which, in a significant moment of grace, she was as 'altogether needful for those who should well discharge the duties of this Institute'.³⁷ (Nor is that surprising, given that the duties of the Institute, as we have seen, particularly called for the exercise of such apostolic friendship.) Those qualities were freedom, justice and sincerity. In her letter to Father Lee in 1615, she tries to convey what she understood by each of these inter-related virtues. Freedom was for her a dimension of love, making it possible to be 'wholly God's' and yet 'whole' to one's neighbour. Mary described it as 'a singular freedom from all that could make one adhere to earthly things, with an entire application and apt disposition to all good works . . . a freedom . . . to refer all to God'.³⁸ Justice, as she described it, encompasses a kind of personal integrity, springing from the sense of a right order of things, of the fundamental relationship between God and man, and leading (like righteousness

in the Old Testament) to 'works of justice, done in innocence'.³⁹ Sincerity was an extension of that justice, letting God's Word speak through human life in all its ordinariness, requiring 'that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are'.⁴⁰

Small wonder then that the tenderness which had characterized Mary's affection since childhood reaches out to her sisters not just in genuine and generous concern for their human needs, caring for their health, following their studies, helping to sort out family worries and so on, but fully sharing with them this charism, this calling, this apostolate. What survives of her correspondence is confirmation of such a sharing. In many ways they are business letters, dealing with the complex problems of a rapidly growing, scattered, as yet unapproved group: maintaining communication, arranging finance and travel, appointments and transfers. Always, however, though usually written in haste and ill-health, they are letters between friends, and the regular communication is precious for its own sake as well as for its content. Typical is the opening of the following letter to Mary Poyntz in 1632:

My dearest, we have too much to effect in deeds ever to waste any words, therefore to business. For the rest you know my heart to be all if not more than you can wish and that for ever.⁴¹

Again and again, in the opening or closing (or even in the postscript), we find an unaffected warmth which turns the letters into real instruments of sustaining companionship, of reaching out to these valiant women and providing a constant strengthening of purpose and trust in the Lord. She writes, for example, to Winifred Bedingfield in 1634:

My dearest, I had made myself sure of these two hours but since that cannot be, be most assured that the less I am now able to say to you, the more I do and will pray for you; be confident in God, and more than ever grateful to his unseen goodness.⁴²

The constant encouragement Mary offers to her sisters reflects her own lively hope, her utter confidence in God's loving care and her firm conviction that to do his will meant happiness—'How happy a thing it is to love God and serve him and seek him *de vero*'.⁴³ The bent of her love for her closest friends is therefore to help them and encourage them to 'be wholly God's'.⁴⁴ While 'her confidence and cheerfulness was . . . communicative to others',⁴⁵ there was also a great directness in her sharing with those closest to her, especially when she asked of them what she knew would

cost them dearly. She appoints her very dear friend, Winifred Wigmore, to a difficult position with the following words:

My dear Winn, A poor title for her, that by this I make the Superior of Naples. Few ceremonies will serve betwixt us, and you know I use none in the placing of offices. You must now bear a part of my burden, and that a great one.⁴⁶

Mary called on the same Winifred to share even more deeply with her the troubles of the time of imprisonment and even seemed to foresee in the following letter that Winifred, too, would be a prisoner of the Inquisition:

. . . the trouble and the long loneliness you heard me speak of is not far from me . . . you are the first I have uttered this conceit so plainly to; pray for me and the work. It grieves me I cannot have you also with me to help to bear a part, but a part you will bear howsoever.⁴⁷

The bond of love between Mary and her companions is strongly evident at her death. She delayed sending for a priest because of 'the tenderness she had for our sufferance'.⁴⁸ When her companions realized that she was dying, she

raising up herself cheerfully sought to sweeten our griefes with comfortable and divine speeches of God's goodness, and Providence, his favours to us, and causes to confide, and seeing still signs of sadness, she said fy, fy, looke not sad on it, come let us sing.

Finally (and it is appropriate that it is recorded in the letter Mary Poyntz wrote about their friend's death to Barbara Babthorpe and her community far away in Rome) Mary 'commended to us with greatest feeling the practice of God's vocation in us, that it be constantly, efficaciously, and affectionately in all'.⁵⁰

In all such friendships and through them, Mary's 'friend of friends'⁵¹ was God. From her first 'desire never to love any but him',⁵² he had led her his own way of exile, suffering, rejection and failure. In all this she had sought only to please him, by bearing all things 'well'.⁵³ There were periods when 'there was no help or comfort for me but to cleave to him, and so I did, for he was there to help me',⁵⁴ and periods when even that consolation seemed withdrawn, yet her characteristic attitude was one of confidence and gratitude. The sensitivity, affection, steadfastness

and freedom evident in her dealings with her friends seem almost to have been learnt through her relationship with God, which she herself calls 'friendship'.⁵⁵ Certainly the love with which she reached out to others, and through the 'efficacy of her words and letters, and even her presence . . . put a soule into God as its centre',⁵⁶ was not her love only. It was his love, active in her, as in her prayer she was privileged to know:

He was very near me, and within me, which I never perceived him to be before. I was moved to ask him with great confidence and humility what I came to know, to wit, what he was. I said, 'My God, what art thou?' I saw him immediately and very clearly go into my heart, and by little and little hide himself in it (and there I perceive him to be still . . .)⁵⁷

Thus she was indeed 'apt for friendship'⁵⁸ and 'apt for all such good works as are in this world to be done'.⁵⁹

NOTES

¹ 'Autobiographical notes in English of Mary Ward,' cited in M.C.E. Chambers, *The Life of Mary Ward* ed. H. J. Coleridge, (London, 1882) vol I, pp 46-47.

² *Italian Autobiography*, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.

³ Letter to the Nuncio Albergati, 1620, quoted in full by J. Leitner, *Geschichte der englischen Fraülein und ihrer Institut* (Regensburg, 1869).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 740 .

⁵ A seventeenth century series of fifty large paintings depicting the life of Mary Ward, Augsburg. The inscriptions seem to be the work of Fr. Tobias Lohner who wrote the first german biography of Mary Ward in 1689.

⁶ The *Briefe Relation* is the earliest biography of Mary Ward in English. It seems to have been written by two of her first companions, Winifred Wigmore and Mary Poyntz between 1650-1657. The unpublished manuscript is held in Manchester. Page references given in this article are from a foolscap copy of the text.

⁷ *Painted Life*, No 17.

⁸ *Italian Autobiography*.

⁹ *Painted Life*, No 19.

¹⁰ *Briefe Relation*, p 2.

¹¹ *Painted Life*, No 21.

¹² Latin Manuscript *Institutum I*. Bibl.Vat.Capp. 47, ff 56v-62r.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Briefe Relation*, p 14.

¹⁶ *Briefe Relation*, p 52.

¹⁷ Letter to Winifred Bedingfield, 1636, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.

¹⁸ *Briefe Relation*, p 9.

¹⁹ M.C.E. Chambers *op. cit.*, vol I, p 191.

²⁰ Pastoral letter from Bishop Blaise, cited in Chambers, *op. cit.*, vol I, p 326.

²¹ *Briefe Relation*, p 8, 9.

²² Autobiographical fragment 1624-1626, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg, p 12.

²³ Letter to Albergati, in Leitner, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Painted Life*, No 23.

²⁵ Letter to Fr Roger Lee, Nov 27th 1615, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.

- ²⁶ *Briefe Relation*, p 16.
- ²⁷ *Mary Ward speaks, maxims of Mary Ward* edited by George Burns (Bristol, 1952), p 20.
- ²⁸ *Painted Life*, No 38.
- ²⁹ *Briefe Relation*, p 13.
- ³⁰ *Briefe Relation*, p 17.
- ³¹ *Briefe Relation*, p 37.
- ³² *Briefe Relation*, p 42.
- ³³ Gravestone, 1645, St Thomas' Church, Osbaldwick, York.
- ³⁴ *Painted Life*, No 41.
- ³⁵ *Briefe Relation*, p 42.
- ³⁶ *Briefe Relation*, p 41.
- ³⁷ Letter to Fr Lee, cited in Chambers, vol I, p 346-347.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Letter to Mary Poyntz, 1632, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.
- ⁴² Letter to Winifred Bedingfield, 1634, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.
- ⁴³ Letter to Winifred Bedingfield, 1633, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.
- ⁴⁴ Letter to Winifred Bedingfield, 1636, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.
- ⁴⁵ *Briefe Relation*, p 33.
- ⁴⁶ Letter to Winifred Wigmore, 1627, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.
- ⁴⁷ Letter to Winifred Wigmore, 1624, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.
- ⁴⁸ *Briefe Relation*, p 36.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Mary Poyntz to Barbara Babthorpe, 1645, cited in Chambers, vol II, p 497.
- ⁵¹ Autobiographical notes, 1617, IBVM archives, Nymphenburg.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ *A soul wholly God's*: an edition of various papers of Mary Ward printed in Calcutta, p 32.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *A soul wholly God's*, p 20.
- ⁵⁶ *Briefe Relation*, p 2.
- ⁵⁷ *A soul wholly God's*, p 8.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.* p 20 .
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p 15.