

In this year where we celebrate the 400 year anniversary of the founding of Mary Ward's Institute, a revolutionary way for women to live an apostolic life in the service of God and others, Christine Burke's book on the life and spirituality of Mary Ward is timely. The author's background as historian and theologian is evident in this insightful book. The turbulent 17th century context within which Mary Ward lived comes to life, and the author draws rich parallels with the turbulent times of the 21st century.

This book will have wide appeal. Those who claim Mary Ward as a model of a woman's way of faithfulness to God and to church—whether religious sisters or lay men and women—will find much to inform and sustain them in the book. Those who work in modern-day ministries related to those Mary Ward began—in schools and universities, especially for girls and women; in spiritual direction; in the service of the poor and marginalised—will find inspiration from it. The book also makes a valuable contribution to feminist theology and will therefore be a useful addition to theology institutes and students.

Dr Leoni Degenhardt, *Principal of Loreto Normanhurst*

I have spent eight years on a very personal journey with Mary Ward, while working on a sculpture for the Loreto Schools in Australia. The unpublished manuscript for this book came to me at a point where I was trying to integrate my research and reading into the creation of an artwork that would be relevant for our times. Chris Burke has analysed this very question; how do these beautiful and profound fragments captured from a life of struggle 400 years ago, speak to our lived reality today?

Meliesa Judge, *sculptor, Liquid Metal Studio*

Who was Mary Ward (1585-1645) and why tell her story now? It is an inspiring story that has been muted over the past 400 years. For much of this time Mary Ward's role in changing the place of women in the Church was suppressed by Church authorities with their own unshakeable version of what women could (or could not) achieve.

John Tidey, *retired journalist, The Age*

Christine Burke is province leader for the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Australia, commonly known as the Loreto Sisters. Christine's ministry background is mainly in theology, adult education and pastoral formation. Mary Ward has provided inspiration and challenge for many people. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Congregation of Jesus are the current inheritors of Mary Ward's legacy and are found in 45 countries.



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

Christine Burke IBVM



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In memory of my mother,
(Doris) Eileen Burke,
who died 14th February 2009.

'God's love is rich enough for us all'

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Introduction

Stories from the past nourish and sustain our spirit. For Christians, the greatest of these is the story of Jesus: his life, his words, and the meaning that he gave to a life lived so that others might live. But alongside him, other ‘friends of God and prophets’ model for us in everyday ways the implications of what it means to be a disciple—one who walks in the footsteps of the one in front.

This small book is an attempt to tell the story of Mary Ward (1585–1645) and to tease out some implications for today of her particular journey as a disciple. But who was she and why bother? Her story has been muted over the past four hundred years. For much of that time her role in changing the place of women in the church was suppressed by church authorities who had their own unshakeable version of what women could or could not achieve. Silenced by the Inquisition, Mary Ward was denied recognition until 1909, when the church finally allowed her sisters to name her as founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This woman who began her company of sisters in 1609–11, now has companions in large cities, in small villages, in schools and universities, parishes, justice networks, retreat centres and welfare services on every continent. Four hundred years after her originating vision, they draw strength from her life and see parallels with their own lives. In many of these centres, a network of companions and co-workers find inspiration in her story. This book is written in the belief that Mary Ward’s story and spirituality are a gift to the wider church, not merely to those who join her Institute.

As with any outstanding figure, the outline or ‘myth’ of her story can become the automatic reference point, rather than taking time to explore the meaning she found in the specific incidents and experiences that carried the pain and the intensity of her particular life journey. ‘Mary Ward taught girls, we continue that tradition’ is true as far as it goes, but can absolve us from seeking the sources of her integrity in the face of church rejection and from risking new initiatives when others believe these are pipe dreams. On the other side, we can miss much and fail to understand the nuances of her story if we do not know the setting out of which she came.

In writing about Mary Ward textual accuracy is difficult. Until the beginning of 2008, no scholarly edition of her writings existed. The four volumes published in that year are a German edition, with some English writings, but most documents are in Latin or Italian, and all the annotations are in German.¹

This book was written before those tomes became available, and thus depends on secondary sources and fragments of quotations. The sources include some autobiographical fragments, retreat jottings, a record of some speeches, successive plans for the congregation, some letters to her friends and church authorities, a short biography by her companions and an amazing series of fifty paintings of her life. Commissioned by her sisters soon after her death, these paintings are a testament to their belief that her name would one day be cleared. It is amazing that even these records remain, given the history of her Institute, the location of its key houses amidst European wars over four centuries, and the command that books and records be burned.

My primary audience when 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. These women and men, who now work in many centres, are not official members of our congregations, but are passionate in their desire to pass on this rich heritage. My aim has been to explore some of the key experiences of life—her life and ours—and to take some of the virtues evident in her life and uncover what her choices might have meant in her time. Some teachers—but not all—in the western world have some understanding of the upheaval caused by the Reformation on the Continent and in England. For teachers on the sub-continent of India, or in Korea, Eastern Africa or South America, the complexity of Christian in-fighting amid the politics of seventeenth century Europe is a confusing riddle, as peripheral to them as contesting Asian dynasties are to western minds. A little understanding of her background can allow other cultural experiences to resonate with or react against that backdrop.

A secondary audience consists of others who seek to deepen their understanding of the spirituality of this woman as a companion for their own personal journey. Mary Ward lived out her discipleship under Jesus in a radical way. She recognised that following him called for a single-minded focus on what God wanted of her. She also knew that, whatever the cost, this commitment on her part was a response in love to a loving friend, not something done in fear. Her journey led her along a path that in many ways replicated that of Jesus. She experienced the pain this caused her, but also entrusted into God's hands those things she could not manage. Her life teaches resourcefulness and acceptance, courage and compassion, integrity and trust.

Chapter 1 tells the story of her life; chapter 2 gives the background of England and Europe in her day; chapter 3 outlines the spiritual heritage she drew on from her contact with the Society of Jesus. Chapters 4 to 6 explore some aspects of her spirituality and link these to issues which resonate in our lives today. Chapters 7 to 9 begin from issues that are clearly on our current agenda—women in the church, evangelization in a post-modern world, and the need for truthfulness—and bring to bear on these issues some insights from Mary Ward’s life and words.

The international Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary met for their General Congregation in Peru in late 2006. Those assembled distilled Mary Ward’s legacy for today’s world into following ‘three calls’:

- to listen to the passion of God and wrestle with the meaning of (religious) life today;
- to develop ways of being with others which reflect a relational God, generous in gift, equality, diversity and outreach;
- to sharpen our engagement with the church and world.

These three calls seem relevant to the task all Christians must engage in if we are to respond to God in a way that is ‘constant, efficacious and loving’.

The style of these chapters reflects various audiences and preoccupations. It is hoped that they will lead to personal reflection, and that something of Mary Ward’s life will reach out to give us courage at this time in the church’s journey, when once again women are in the vanguard of those who see the need for change. The sheer focus of her life on following Jesus may also draw students to look afresh at her ‘Friend of all friends’ and to risk the challenging path of discipleship. Inevitably, there is repetition, as those chapters which explore an aspect of her life pull a thread through the whole fabric.

Endnotes

1. Ursula Dirmeier, *Mary Ward und ihre Gründung: die Quellentexte bis 1645*, volumes 1-4 (Münster: Aschendorff, 2007).

