



Over 400 years ago, Mary Ward was born into a world not unlike ours in difficulties, except that now the world's disasters come to us instantly via satellite communications. Mary spent her life following God's guidance in seeking something new. How contemporary with us was her foresight in championing women's role in spreading God's compassion: how many today struggle as she did for the triumph of truth and justice. For us, and we hope for you, she continues to share her zealous vitality.

This is her story.

Born in 1585 into a devoted Catholic family in Yorkshire, from childhood Mary Ward knew religious persecution, not unlike trouble spots in today's world: raids, imprisonment, torture, execution. Frequently separated from her family for her own protection, Mary was inspired by their steadfast heroism. At age fifteen, she felt called to become a religious. Since religious communities had been dispersed decades previously in England and on the continent, cloistered life was the only option for women at that time. She left England to become a Poor Clare. Through special graced insights, God showed her that she was to do something different and would manifest God's glory. Leaving the Poor Clares, she worked in disguise to preserve the Catholic Faith in England before founding a community of active sisters in 1609 at St. Omer in present-day Belgium. Without cloister, she and her companions educated young women, helped persecuted and imprisoned Catholics, and spread the word of God in places priests could not go.

The Sisters lived and worked openly on the continent, but secretly in England to nurture the faith.

At one time, she was imprisoned in England for her work with outlawed Catholics. Many who knew her, from bishops and monarchs to simple people, admired her courage and generosity. In days before Boeing 747's or even Amtrak, she traveled Europe on foot, in dire poverty and frequently ill, founding schools in the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Austria, and in today's Czech Republic and Slovakia. Criticized and maligned for her efforts to expand the role of women in spreading the faith, she was imprisoned by Church officials who called her a dangerous heretic. Her work was destroyed, her community suppressed, and her sisters scattered. Never abandoning her trust in God's guidance, she died in York, England, in 1645 during the Cromwellian Civil War. To the end, she trusted totally that what God had asked of her would be accomplished in the future.

Mary Ward taught by example and words. Act “without fear... in quiet confidence that God will do his will in the confusion.” Her unwavering fidelity to “that which God would” was nourished by deep contemplative prayer. To Mary, God was the “Friend of all friends.” She lived her fidelity with cheerfulness and a passion for truth. What may seem to us ordinary was startling in her time: she had no pattern to follow when she established her community for women, except the life and work followed by the Jesuit men. She sought to empower women to fulfill whatever part God called them to play, as did the women in the Acts of the Apostles, as women concerned for the poor. Mary and her companions established free schools, nursed the sick and visited prisoners. Even her Protestant neighbors attested to her love for the poor and her perseverance in helping them. Her concept of freedom for her community, externally from cloister, choir, habit, and rule by men, and internally in the ability to “refer all to God,” enabled her to live undeterred by adversity, never deviating from the way God called her. She invited her followers to “become lovers of truth and workers of justice.”

Not until 1909 did the Church finally recognize Mary Ward as founder of the IBVM. She was a pioneer for women’s role in Church ministry and a woman ahead of her time in shaping apostolic religious life as we know it today. Mary Ward expected much and believed with all her heart that, “Women in time to come will do much.”