

Journeying with Mary Ward

1585 - 1645

Introduction

“Mary Ward is God’s gift to the Church and to the world, for she brought, especially to women, a new dimension; she made it possible for women to be involved in the field of education and hence in preparing girls and women for a new role within the church. She could be this gift only because, like Mary, she was the handmaid of the Lord.”

Mother Teresa

Mary Ward was born in 1585 into a staunch Catholic Yorkshire family. Like all innovators Mary Ward provides us with a life story which makes fascinating reading. Her life was rich in external events but even richer in its internal dimension. All the ingredients of a great adventure story – Religious persecution in England, Perilous journeys on sea and land, A new venture in religious life for women, Challenge from within the group she founded, Opposition from without, Imprisonment as a heretic and finally death, with the English civil War raging about her are – found in this life story.

Background

To grasp the full significance of this gift we need to know something of the world and Church of her time. Her world was England and Europe in the years 1585 to 1645. These were years following the reformation when, “the religion of the prince was the religion of the people.” England, her native land, had broken ties with Rome and Catholics were forbidden under the threat of death to practice their religion. In spite of danger many Catholic families sought to keep the faith alive by harbouring priests and enabling people to receive the Sacraments. Many suffered imprisonment and even martyrdom. Beyond the shore of England the Continent of Europe in these years was also torn by constant religious wars and political rivalries.

Journeying With Mary Ward

Phase One 1585 –1600

Childhood

Mary Ward was born at Mulwith near Ripon Yorkshire on 23rd January 1585. She was the first child of Marmaduke Ward and his wife Ursula Wright. This innocent and charming girl was baptized as Joan. Having a great devotion and reverence to our Blessed Mother she chose the

name Mary on her confirmation day. Mary was just a year old when Margaret Clitherow suffered martyrdom for refusing to give information about harbouring priests.

The small child Mary could not yet speak and was barely able to walk when she was one day in danger of having an accident. Horrified her mother exclaimed, "Jesus, bless my child." Upon which the child turned and repeated the word Jesus clearly. It was her first, and for several months her only word.

At the age of four Mary had the judgment to discern. No one in Marmaduke Ward's house was allowed to use swear words even to swear by holy names in a light manner. Mary was playing in her father's room with a companion of hers when the latter suddenly swore by Christ His Holy wounds. Mary repeated the words thinking her father would hear and love her better but he was angry and gave her a beating, the first and last time in her life.

When Mary Ward was five years old she was sent to live with her maternal grandparents Robert and Ursula Wright, as her parents were shifting towards Northumberland due to the pressure from the Protestant Church to give up Catholicism. As Mary was not strong enough to withstand the biting cold and east winds of Northumberland she remained in Ploughland up to the age of ten.

Mary's grandmother had suffered imprisonment for 14 years. Mary says of her, "so great a prayer was she that I do not remember in that whole five years that I ever saw her sleep, nor did I ever wake when I did not perceive her to be at her prayers." She taught her Latin, needle work and singing with notes which were very useful to her when she grew up. Mary also learned household management by watching her grandmother who gave her small domestic jobs to perform.

Mrs. Wright took care of the prisoners who depended on others for their food. Once she ordered some of her hens to be killed. Mary heard this and told her grandmother that she would also like to give her own hens. This seemed to please her much. Mary did it only to gain her esteem because the child craved for love and attention. Elsewhere, she writes "when my grandmother commanded me to pray I sat in the place but spent my time in sports."

When she was ten her father brought her back to Mulwith. On her arrival home Mary found a family of three sisters, Theresa, Elisabeth, Barbara and two brothers John and George. It was Barbara who became one of the foundation stones of her sister's Institute.

A little girl's high spirits:

One evening she wanted the maid to carry her to bed so she climbed upon the maids shoulders but fell down and thereby lost her power of speech. She was duly put to bed while thinking to herself she would willingly die if only she could once more say the name of Jesus. At any rate she did manage to say the same of Jesus and suffered no further consequences from her fall. Mary was not badly hurt; but the incident caused by her childish high spirits, remained associated in her mind with a special grace. At the age of ten, Jesus was already the all important name for her.

Redshaw's proposal

When Mary was ten years of age, she was urged by her parents to marry a young man by the name of Redshaw. He was distinguished both by his riches and his noble birth. She prayed fervently to God, imploring him to prevent this marriage if it were not to His glory and for the good of her soul.

Mary's family deeply believed in God; her betrothal was a matter to be entrusted to God in prayer. This habit of turning God in prayer, when in doubt was Mary's precious family heritage. If she was uncertain as to what to do, or have to make an important decision, she felt the need to turn to God, to the blessed mother and to the saints just as she had learned to do at home.

In a few months after the betrothal Redshaw died. It is not clear whether Mary was released from the obligation of accepting it through the death of her suitor or by some other means. Mary herself was later to write, God helped her by removing what could have proved an obstacle for her salvation.

The Fire at Mulwith

Still only ten Mary was again in need of help. Her father's mansion at old Mulwith was burnt down. It was a feast of Our Lady in the year of 1595. The purification according to Mary's account; the annunciation according to the text of the painted life. A great fire broke out at Mary's home at Mulwith. Efforts to control the flames were of no avail. In the general confusion no one thought of the three children until Marmaduke missed them.

Aware of the danger, Mary had gone down to the ground floor with her sisters Elisabeth and Barbara. The father rushed back to the building, found all three children praying the rosary and brought them out safely. Mary later wrote that it was by the intercession of our blessed mother that she and her sisters came to no harm.

At the time of these three events Mary was at the tenth and eleventh year of her life. These three events touch upon three different areas of her life.

- She manifests high spirits and suffers consequences.
- She is offered a lasting bond, no doubt, within the frame work of filial obedience.
- She finds herself trapped in the burning house.

Mary reacts to each event in conformity with her religious world. Places her trust in the name of Jesus, prays with her parents and expresses her faith in the powerful intercession of our blessed mother.

The first phase of Mary's Spiritual training in her family has now ended. The foundations - her love for Jesus and her trust in her blessed Mother have been laid. Such was the spiritual gifts she has received from her parents. When in need she knew to whom to turn for help. The basic chord of her life was already audible.

"Thou tookest me into thy care" - 1595 – 1600

During this part of her life, she was to live almost exclusively with relations away from her own home. There may have been variety of reasons for this like:-

- the need to educate her
- to safeguard her delicate health
- it was not unusual those days for girls to be entrusted to relations or friend for their education.

A great persecution arose in the country and Mary's parents were forced to quit Mulwith and transport themselves to Northumberland. Owing to the delicate health of his eldest daughter Mary her father did not wish to expose her to the harsh northern climate. He took her to stay with Mrs. Ardington who lived at Harewell, a relative of Mary's maternal side. We are now to watch Mary moving a step further on the road to spiritual wisdom. She is now planning to learn discernment and take decisions.

Shafto's Proposal –a second offer of marriage.

When Mary was in her twelfth year, she was again urged by her parents to accept a very suitable offer of marriage from a gentle man by the name Shafto. She insisted on refusing this proposal esteeming that God alone is worthy of her love. When relating the story of her vocation Mary makes it clear that in the above mentioned case she had as yet no reason for turning it down. She has no dislike towards marriage but she could never affect men nor find repose in them. In her own words "I refused such offers not because of the desire to become religious but because I could not affect them."

The man on horseback

When Mary was 13, the devil came to her under the appearance of Francis Carle, her father's man servant. He was on horse back and read out a letter to her, supposed to be from her father, containing strict orders that she was to put off her first communion until she received further instructions. Mary was preparing for her first communion from the feast of ascension – 15th August till the sacred Nativity of Mary 8th September 1597 or 1598. And now this messenger from her father whom she loved entirely dear, so she ran out to him, not thinking that it was against the civil and ordinary way. Mary was naturally spontaneous, a character she never lost.

She was totally perplexed when she understood that she was to put off her first communion and that her father wanted her to marry. She was very upset and found herself alone. She did not want Mrs. Ardington to thank that her father was beginning to give up his faith. So Mary said nothing to her. There was only one thing to do – to take refuge with our Lord in the Chapel. She felt that if she obeys the order given to her, she would be guilty of infidelity to Christ. Tears flowed, she struggled inwardly and finally made up her mind to receive Holy Communion at the first opportunity thus regaining her peace of soul. Soon after this event Mary discovered from her mother that her father had never sent such a messenger.

First Holy Communion.

In her 13th year after overcoming many obstacles, Mary prepared with great zeal and devotion for her first Holy Communion. In the year 1597 or 1598, possibly still in September, Mary received her first communion. She had to wait until a Priest came to the house.

On this occasion Mary received such light and knowledge from God that throughout her life she drew strength from the Eucharist.

A third marriage proposal Eldrington.

While at Harewell, Mary received another offer of marriage from a young man Eldrington from distinguished birth and other eminent qualities. This time her reactions were clearer. She was 13 years of age and was neither cold nor insensitive by nature. In fact she later wrote that she had never seen anyone else who made such an impression on her like Eldrington. Although deeply affected by this offer of marriage, she felt unable to give her consent. She went through great interior suffering and fell dangerously ill. But Marmaduke did not exercise any pressure on her daughter thinking that the right bridegroom was yet to be found. He came to Harewell to fetch her to home.

Once again her parents moved to Northumberland. Mary being a delicate child could not go with them. So her father took her to stay with an old Yorkshire family called Babthorpes at Osgodby, who were their cousins.

Lady Grace Babthorpe had given personal witness to her faith by being brought before Tribunals and suffering imprisonment. At the Babthorpes refugee priests could be sure of a kind welcome. One reason why her parents sent her there was to place her before more people in order to have a better opportunity of finding a suitable partner. Mary soon felt at home with this large family because their daily life was almost monastic, every thing being centered on the Divine service. Mary learned to divide up the days of the week for practicing various virtues and dedicate the different rooms of the house to different saints in order to keep herself more constantly in the presence of God. The six and a half solitary years Mary spent with the Babthorpe family prepared her for the future leading her step by step to detach her the surroundings which were dear to her.

Mary was now 15 years old, an age when most people begin to think about themselves and their future. We have already heard from her how she had refused Suitors for the simple reason that she did not particularly like them. So with an uncommitted heart she now came under the influence of the Babthorpe household's strictly religious regime.

Mary Ward: Time Line

Phase – One

1585 – 1600

1. 1585 Mary was born on 23 January in Yorkshire, England. Her parents were Ursula Wright and Marmaduke Ward.
2. 1585-1590 Mary lived with her parents at Mulwith until she was five years old.
3. 1590-1594 Until she was nearly ten years old Mary lived with her grandparents, Robert and Ursula Wright, at Ploughland Hall, East Riding, Yorkshire.
Her grandmother taught her Latin and Mary read the Fathers of the Church. When her grandfather died Mary returned to her parents.
4. 1595-1597 Mary lived with her family. She had three younger sisters and two younger brothers. When Mulwith was burnt in 1595 the family moved to Newby.
5. 1597-1598 The family moved to Northumberland and Mary lived with Mrs. Ardington of Harewell. She made her first Communion there on 8th September 1598.
6. 1599-1600 Mary lived with relatives, the Babthorpe family, at Osgodby. With her cousins Mary was educated by tutors and learnt Latin, French, Italian and German.