

Journeying With Mary Ward

Phase Two 1600 – 1615

Seed of religious vocation is sowed

It was while living at Babthorpe that Mary first began to feel that she wanted to become a religious. But as she was very timid and shy, she did not talk to any one about it.

One day, when Mary was fifteen, she sat sowing with her cousin Barbara Babthorpe, while Margaret Garrett, a most trusted servant of the household told them of the severe punishment inflicted on a religious whose conduct had given scandal.

A nun had been involved with a man and sinned seriously against her vows and the consequences followed. After the birth of the child she was re-admitted to the community. But among other punishments, she was told, whenever the other sisters went into the choir, she had to lie before the choir door, so that the other nuns would step over her as they entered. On hearing this story Mary received so much light from God on the excellence of the religious life that she decided to embrace this state of perfection.

Soon she began her first steps in the spiritual life. Practised forms of asceticism, read spiritual books and above all, prayed a great deal now again she fasted and also undertook stricter forms of penance by interior and exterior mortification.

In an effort to overcome her longing for notice and attention, she got hold of a pail of water and broom and set about sweeping the house with the servants, so that visitors would think that she was one of them.

One day one of the maids had scabies and had to stay in bed. Mary got into bed with her in order to overcome her great partiality for cleanliness. She became infected and even prayed not to be healed; but soon recovered.

“To be wholly god’s”, this is what religious life was all about for Mary Ward. “God gave me at that instance such a desire to love any but him, that ever since that time I have had the least inclining thought to the contrary which light and love came wholly from Him. Mary’s conviction deepened that she must enter the religious life on the continent in the strictest monastery, since ‘a soul should give herself to God entirely; not by halves’.

A Burning Desire for Martyrdom

When Mary was sixteen and read the lives of the holy martyrs, she was seized with such a burning desire to follow their example. This desire for martyrdom was absolutely in keeping with Mary Ward’s nature. ‘To be wholly God’s’, expresses the way in which she understood God’s call to her. She always wanted to give her all, “not in part but altogether. Hence her first response showed itself in a longing for martyrdom, but God directed her revealing to her that,

“He required of her spiritual, rather than bodily martyrdom”, and the vehemence of her desire for martyrdom was moderated.

Slowly Mary’s conviction strengthened that she must enter religious life on the continent in the strictest monastery. It was obvious to all her relatives and friends, confessor and acquaintances what direction Mary was taking. So they persuaded her to marry and found a catholic family which was more pleasing to God and more necessary for the church in England than entering a religious life.

Marmaduke Ward came to talk to his daughter and absolutely forbade her to leave England without his permission. She did not argue with him for she loved her father deeply. But she remained firmly resolved to cross over to Flanders even were she never again to see her father.

The Gunpowder Plot-1605

This was a plan to blow up the British Parliament in which two of Mr. Marmaduke Ward’s brothers-in-law John and Christopher Wright and Thomas Percy, the husband of his sister-in-law Martha, were at the heart of the Plot.

In mid October Marmaduke set out for London and while he was still on his way the gun powder plot was discovered on November 5th 1605. He was suspected of taking part in the plot or at any rate of knowing about it. He was arrested and brought for trial but was soon released. On November 8th the plotters were arrested and executed. Thomas Percy who was severely injured died shortly after in the Tower.

Fourth Marriage Proposal

In 1606, Mary was urged not only by her parents but also by her confessor, Fr, Holtby, to marry a young man named Edmund Neville the sole heir of a very ancient and noble family who swore that he would marry no one else were Mary to refuse him. By then, however, Mary had made up her mind. She knew that she must be “wholly God’s” and took refuge in Him. She put herself totally in the hands of God and spent day and night in prayer and penance imploring God to accomplish His holy will in her. While thus praying, the words of Christ, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His justice” came to her mind and she felt sure of God’s assistance. Thus she heroically obeyed the call of God and did not yield to human persuasion.

The Spilling of the Chalice

When Mary’s confessor, Fr. Holtby SJ was offering Mass in London in 1606, it happened by divine permission that he inadvertently spilt the chalice. This wrought such a change in him that when, Mary, after Mass, respectfully handed him a towel to dry his hands, he said to her, with tears streaming from his eyes, “I will never again hinder your religious design, but further you all I can. From then onwards he ceased to oppose Mary’s intention. Her father also gave his consent to his beloved daughter.

In Search of the Way – 1606-1609

The first period of Mary's apprenticeship was now over. She had learnt to adapt to the various families and to their surroundings. She had learnt to mix with people of all ages and social classes. In the company of the housewives in their families she saw what women could achieve by devoting themselves to their own people and to those around them. She realized how much the future of the faith depended on women. At 21 Mary experienced God as her one and only refuge and was well equipped for her future task.

Mary leaves England for the first time

In 1606 Mary being 21 then, left home with her confessor's approval and parents' consent, accompanied by Mrs. Bentley, the great grand daughter of St. Thomas More to whose care she had been entrusted. Filled with unspeakable joy at being able at last to enter the religious state, she took the ship to Saint Omer. But soon a great obscurity darkened her mind and doubts rose up in her as to where and what religious order she should have to settle. In this darkness and disquiet of soul she sailed from Dover to Calais and then covered the remaining 40km to Saint Omer on horse back.

On arrival, she directed her steps to the English Seminary in order to find out about possible convents in the town. She had with her Fr. Holtby's letter of recommendation to Fr. Flacke, rector of English Jesuit College in Saint Omer. But while waiting in the parlour, Fr. George Keynes (Jesuit) welcomed her. Strangely enough, it seemed, her arrival was already reckoned with and she was expected at the monastery of Waloon Poor Clares who were urgently in need of a good out-sister.

Fr. Keynes praised the fidelity to rule, up bringing and noble origin of the English religious in the convent. The rule, he told Mary was the same for both choir and lay sisters; only the lay sisters had to support the enclosed (choir) sisters with their labours. It was God's will that she should enter there.

Mary felt in herself "an extreme repugnance to their offer." "But the words 'will of God' so pierced my heart that I had no inclination to say or think of anything else" and she adds, "reasoning with in myself that this repugnance and disinclination could only come from pride, since the place offered me was only more abject and contemptible.

Mary joins the Poor Clare's in Saint Omer

The very next day after her arrival in Saint Omer, she was invited to join the Poor Clares founded by St. Francis and St. Clare in 1212. Strictly monastic, they are considered the most austere order of women in the Catholic Church. However, she waited another month or so before taking the habit, because from the first, she said openly that she found it hard to be a lay-sister. The Provincial of the Franciscans had doubts about admitting her because he felt that she was unsuited to go out on begging rounds. Likewise in the little town of Saint Omer the people murmured because Mary was not being admitted as a choir Candidate. The nuns replied that⁵ in her humility, she wanted at all cost to serve the choir sisters. Yet such feelings were far from her

mind. In the end the Provincial agreed to admitting her and in June 1606 she received the habit and started her daily routine trudging the streets to beg for food for the convent

Fr. Keynes remained Mary's confessor for the first two months. Realizing that he had been mistaken in advising her to enter, he told her so; likewise to her superiors. So they changed her confessor and she was told to confess to their regular confessor, a French Franciscan, although she could not yet express properly in that language. To whom could she turn for help? God was her one and only refuge. She knew that He could neither deceive nor be deceived. Both the begging rounds and the whole manner of life made demands on Mary such as she could not have endured.

When God is sought sincerely, the way to Him is always open. Convinced of this Mary turned to God and her prayer was answered on the feast of St. Gergory the Great March 12th 1607. The canonical visitor came to the monastery for visitation. He spoke to Mary and told her that she was not suited to this manner of life. Mary breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly she was seized with an overwhelming desire to found a monastery for the English members of the Poor Clares.

At that particular moment there was no one with whom she could discuss her situation. Her superior, Mary Stephen Goodge was ill and Mary could not contact her. So she wrote down what she felt and handed it over to the superior. She too agreed that the manner of life was not suited to the novice; that God wished her to be a choir sister of that order. Feeling certain that she had done her part in trying to follow the way God intended her to go, Mary left the monastery a few days later.

Foundation of the English Poor Clares

After leaving the novitiate, Mary gave herself to her new work, namely, the founding of a monastery of Poor Clares for English girls. One of the conditions was that the future monastery was to live on the dowries of the community, not from begging arms. Within two years, a convenient site had been acquired, a spacious convent and chapel built and girls with suitable qualities and talents were admitted to probation. The five English members of the Waloon convent left their former community and joined the new convent.

On Dec. 28th 1608, the Bishop appointed Mary Stephen Goodge, Mary Ward's former superior as Abbess. Mary and her own sister Frances were among the novices. Father Roger Lee, a Jesuit, gave the Exercises to the sisters and candidates for a month. The retreat over, all were eager to engage in their new life.

Mary in her own Foundation

Mary had spent much energy in founding the monastery. The food was frugal; only the sick were allowed meat. Mary slept little as she suffered from hunger. Soon the question arose whether the Foundress of the monastery should not be admitted without delay to profession. The Bishops and the Jesuits were in favour; but the Abbess was against it. So on February 6th 1609, she received the habit of a postulant. Mary felt completely at peace she believed that she had reached her journey's end, even if at time she felt uncertain about it.

‘Some Other Thing’

On May 2nd 1609, on the feast of St. Athanasius, while busy making Franciscan cords with others, she received an interior light which completely absorbed her. She was given to understand that she was not to be of the order of St. Clare. “Some other thing I was to do”, she writes. The mandate came as an order regardless of her personal inclination. But what it was or in what it consisted, I did not know; only that it was to be a good thing and what God willed.

The next day she spoke to Fr. Lee, who reserved his judgment, “exhorting me”, says Mary, to a more than ever exact observance of the rules”, that she might obtain clarity. The Abbess reacted even more firmly than Fr. Lee, and dealt harshly with Mary. But in the end even she could not help admiring how resolute Mary remained during this trying time.

Then the time came for the community to move to the new convent in the city of Gravelines. But Mary saw more and more clearly that God did not want her to proceed as a Poor Clare. So she remained a few weeks in Saint Omer waiting for some sign from God. The anguish, though great was endurable, because, “the one who placed the burden also carried it.”

With Fr. Roger Lee’s approval she made a vow of chastity and promised to become a religious, but not of any particular order. She made another vow to enter the Carmelites, if Fr. Lee should command it. Having done this Mary returned to England, living most of the time in London, where she was able to help many people.

An Uncertain Future

Once again Mary was alone, in a very humiliating situation. The people in London were quick to taunt her with “run away nun”, but Mary held her peace. Dressed in accordance with her social status, she could move around in all kinds of circles. When it seemed advisable, she exchanged clothes with the humblest of servants she visited Catholics in prison, enabled the sick to receive the sacraments. Through her great power of attraction, she persuaded many who had stayed from the faith to be reconciled with God and return to the right path. Modest reserve coupled with daring courage characterised Mary. While in England Mary had the first three pivotal experiences which were to point the way for the foundation of an active, unenclosed religious Institute for women.

The Glory Vision – 1609

One morning, towards the end of 1609, after making her meditation coldly and not at all to her satisfaction, while Mary was doing her hair before a mirror, something supernatural befell her and she had a profound spiritual experience. “It was shown to me with clearness and inexpressible certainty that I was not to be of the order of St. Teresa. But some other thing was determined for me, without all comparison, more to the glory of God. I did not know what the assured good thing would be, but the glory of God which was to come through it showed itself inexplicable and so abundantly as to fill my soul in such a way, that I remained for good space of

time without feeling or hearing any thing, but the sound Glory, Glory, Glory. Returning to myself I found my heart full of love for this thing”.

But she was filled with fear, wondering what would happen if her confessor were to order her to enter Carmel, in accordance with the vow. On the other hand she found it impossible to oppose what has been revealed to her in this experience.

The Glory Vision marks the beginning of Mary’s mission to found the Institute. The past no longer seemed to matter. She now knew that the one aim of her life was the praise and glory of God in every thing.

In that hour the Institute was born. The glory of God, she was told, was to be her own end and that of her Institute-to live for the glory of God under the banner of the cross. Surely Glory Vision belongs to our Institute heritage and is at the root of our vocation to the C.J. family.

‘Step by step God was drawing Mary Ward to him until he demanded the final step - courage to undertake a completely new and unheard of way of life for religious women, one that was to be rejected as an absurd challenge to the social order of the day. (H. Peters, P.109) This new way for women in the Church on which God was leading her did not yet exist. She was to find a middle way between enclosure and apostolic life in the world. It was her task to be the pioneer in a way of life for religious women who live apostolically in the world and work for the Church. But how should this life be organized that was to promote God’s Glory? She did not know. So ‘she prayed and put on hair shirt’ (HP.P.109).

Gathering together in England for an apostolic Community-end of 1609

During her stay in England, Mary came to know several like minded young women from noble families, who wanted to live a spiritual life with her in an apostolic community. We do not know where she met them: perhaps on visits to her relations, or while visiting the sick or prisoners, perhaps at festive occasions or at masses held in secret. These were opportunities to get to know people. Probably these meetings took place soon after her arrival in England, since Mary Ward soon returned to Saint Omer.

Crossing to Saint Omer 1609/1610

In England apostolic work could be carried out only under the most dangerous conditions. It is possible that several of these women had already considered emigrating and now put their plan into action under Mary Ward’s guidance (Peters110). Mary arrived in Saint Omer with five companions-Winefrid Wigmore, Susana Rookwood, Catherine Smith, Jane Brown and Mary Poyntz. They were soon joined by Barbara Ward, Mary’s own sister and Barbara Babthorpe whom Mary had known at Osgodby. They were bound together by their common vocation to religious life and their readiness to lay down their lives for faith. At the end of 1609 the companions joined her in England; they settled at Saint Omer early in 1610.

Mary acquired a house at the corner of the Rue Grosse which was ordered and furnished in a manner so as to live in regular observance. In the very next year she bought one of the neighbouring houses, to be followed soon after by a third one. At the same time she endeavoured to obtain the approval of the Bishop, the Archduke in Brussels and the Magistrate of Saint Omer to make a new foundation for the nuns there.

Apostolic Activity in Saint Omer.

From the beginning they had the intention of using the house in Saint Omer not only as a school and boarding for English children but also to train their own members.

They began their work with pastoral care of adults among the English emigrants. The daughters of the English emigrants were taught lessons in faith formation. Educating the women was the main task of the newly-founded Institute. Mary and her companions were soon called the 'English Ladies', a name which is still used for them in the continent. They practised severe penances, similar to those of Poor Clares. Since Mary was still uncertain about the inner structure of the new foundation, she held on to that which was familiar to her. Prayer, penance and fasting were means of obtaining light from God as to which manner of life that "other thing" was to adopt. Mary went through yet another period of darkness, not knowing which rule she was to adopt. To obtain knowledge of the will of God in this matter, she and hers ate one meal a day; lay on straw beds only with diverse other austerities. But soon she realized that such penances were incompatible with the demands of daily life.

Take the Same of the Society - Saint Omer-1611

So far Mary Ward and her companions had no clear picture in mind of what might develop out this apostolic beginning. But after a time of practical experiment, God showed them the next step, and gave them a clear task in 1611.

Towards the end of 1611 Mary fell seriously ill. Her companions went on a pilgrimage to Montaignu, where they prayed to Our Lady to cure Mary, who in fact recovered. On their return she explained to them the grace she received through an illumination. "One day while I was all alone and in an extra-ordinary repose of mind I perceived quite plainly by an interior voice, in what way I was to organize the Institute. This brought me so great light, consolation and strength, that it was impossible for me to doubt that this knowledge came from the Divine Truth who is unable to deceive."

In a letter to Nuncio Albergati Mary quoted the guidance she received. "I heard distinctly, not by sound of voice, but intellectually understood these words, 'Take the same of the society', so understood as that we were to take the same both in matter and manner, that only excepted, which God by diversity of sex has prohibited".

In a letter to Fr. John Tomson, rector of the English Novitiate in Liege, Mary wrote regarding this; "Take the same of the Society. Father General will never permit it. Go to him. These are the words whose worth cannot be valued nor the good that they contain too dearly bought. These gave sight where there was none; made known what God would have done; gave what

since hath, assurance of what is wished for in times to come and if I should ever be worthy to do any thing further for the Institute then I must proceed from them”.

First clouds on the horizon

Mary had to inform her confessor about this experience. But Fr. Lee was not in favour of a close assimilation with the Society of Jesus and so he tried to moderate the enthusiasm of Mary and her companions for an integral adoption of the Ignatian Constitutions. But Mary herself was never one for half measures, so here too it was a matter of all or nothing for her.

The English fathers came to know of the intentions of Mary Ward and her companions. The towns’ people, likewise the opponents of the Society of Jesus, noticed the direction things were taking; so the Jesuits began to fear possible negative effects of their own order.

Mary Ward was initiating something new in the Church, with the aim of establishing a wide-spread Institute, under a central government and without enclosure, thus allowing for grater freedom to serve others. In spite of the clouds gathering in the horizon, Mary was convinced that she had not misunderstood God’s will.

Among the Jesuits, doubts arose as to whether the Institute could ever rest on canonical foundations. The English secular clergy also expressed doubts concerning the activity of Mary Ward and her companions. Other English convents and their patrons also were envious of Mary Ward and her companions. In spite of many complaints reaching the ears of the Bishop of Saint Omer he took up the defence of Mary Ward and her foundation. In 1614 Fr. Lee was transferred from Saint Omer so that he could be kept away from Mary Ward’s foundation. The removal of Fr. Lee may well have shattered Mary Ward. Yet she kept to her course, which she had to follow in greater isolation.

Mary Ward’s Three Plans

The First Plan:-

Schola Beatae Mariae

The first exposition of Mary Ward’s plan for the Institute is found in a document entitled Schola Beatae Mariae. This plan may have been prepared for presentation to Bishop Blaes of Saint Omer in order to obtain his approval for the new foundation. It was written before 1612 with the assistance of Fr. Roger Lee. In general this plan can be seen as a bridge between the cloistered life Mary experience in the Poor Cares and the active apostolic life she was to develop. The document in fifty-seven paragraphs gave the aims of the new enterprise and specified the means for their achievement. According to this plan the aim of the institute was to strive both for one’s own salvation through renunciation of the world and for the salvation of others through Christian Education. The radical elements found in this document are:- Special insistence on Jesuit confessors, a provision for bidding any control by a male religious order, novitiate for two years, recitation of office in private and the provision for dependent houses under a central authority.

This document was written barely two years after Mary left the Poor Clare Convent. Even in such early days the outlines of her new model – an active apostolic life, chiefly education, houses under the centralized control of the superiors, based on the Ignatian principles of religious life – were clear.

Vision of the Just Soul

“On the feast of all saints in 1615, at Saint Omer, God showed Mary a just soul in inexpressible beauty”.

“The felicity of this estate was a singular freedom from all that could make one adhere to earthly things, with an entire application and apt disposition to all good works. Something also happened in discovering the freedom that such a soul should have to refer all to God. Works of justice, done in innocence, and that we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are (letter to Fr. Lee 1615).

As a result of the vision of the ‘Just Soul’ what struck Mary Ward most was a freedom to ‘refer all to God’, which when translated into Ignatian terms means ‘to seek and find God in all things’. Mary defined what came to be called her concept of the Just Soul in terms of three kinds of freedom:-

Freedom from attachment to worldly values,
Freedom for all works of justice necessary in this world,
Freedom to refer all to God.

Freedom, Justice and sincerity, the qualities by which we as human beings participate in God’s own life of goodness and wisdom are the core values of this special kind of holiness revealed to her through the vision of the Just Soul. What she describes are the qualities of a person who would most perfectly serve in her Institute. She picked out the three characteristics that impressed her most – Freedom, Justice and Sincerity.

The ideal put before her in the vision of the Just soul is: integrated persons, at peace with themselves, enjoying intimate familiarity with God and therefore able to help others to reach this state.

From the Trinitarian point of view, the threefold grace she received with the vision of the Just Soul could be interpreted as:

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit
Who can breathe into us the virtues of,
Justice, sincerity and freedom,
We are placed with Christ,
To serve his kingdom for the salvation of the world
That God may be glorified in all.

The spiritual shaping of the Institute is now complete. The ultimate end had been revealed;

likewise the means to attain this end, finally the interior dispositions of the companions who are to live this way of the Institute in daily practice. The next 30 years would only confirm what has already been revealed to Mary Ward.

The Glory Vision – the Quest of the journey
Take the Same – the Path of the journey
The Just Soul – the quality of the journeyers.

The Second Plan: Ratio Instituti

This plan was drawn up late in 1615 as a formal proposition to be presented to the Holy See. It commenced in the same way as the Schola Beatae Mariae, locating the inspiration for the enterprise in the dire situation of the church in England. This plan included freedom from the jurisdiction of local or religious ordinary with subjection to the Pope alone.

A prominent English Catholic layman, Mr. Thomas Sackville, presented the document in Rome in Jan 1616 together with commendatory letters from Bishop Blaes. It is unlikely that Pope Paul V saw the petition, which was passed on to congregation of the Cardinals of the Council of Trent. A guarded reply from Cardinal Orazio Lancellotti to Bishop Blaes gave hope to the Institute that confirmation would be forth coming.

Phase Two- Time Line

1600 – 1615

1600-1606 marriage.	In 1605 Edmund Neville became a suitor for Mary's hand in She refused him and declared her desired to be a religious. In 1606 Mary traveled from England to Calais and then to Saint
Omer. (Franciscans).	Mary became an extern Sister in a Convent of Poor Clares
1607	Mary left the Poor Clares.
1607-1608 the	Mary established a convent for English Poor Clares at Gravelines, in province of Flanders.

1609
the

Mary understood that she was not called to be a Poor Clare and left
Convent she had founded.

prison.

Mary returned to London and visited Catholics in hiding and in

was

She received the 'Glory Vision' by which she understood that she

of

not to be a Carmelite but was called to another vocation 'to the glory
God'.

1610
teach

Mary returned to Saint Omer with some companions. They began to

English girls who went there seeking refuge from the persecution of
Catholics in England.

1611
words

Mary had a vision of the spiritual foundation of her Institute. The

She understood were: 'Take the same of the Society' (that is, of the
Society of Jesus, the Jesuits).

1609-1615

Mary and companions lived at Saint Omer. She made several visits
to England and procured a house in London. In October 1615 she
had the illumination called 'The vision of the Just Soul'.