

Founder of the Institutum Beatae Mariae Virginis (English Ladies)

Mary Ward was born into a Roman Catholic family of landed gentry at Mulwith Manor near Boroughbridge in the dangerous dying years of the 16th century. Her father, Marmaduke Ward, owned another manor at Newby and had land at Roecliffe. During her North Yorkshire childhood she witnessed the persecution of Catholics, learnt about the martyrs and found herself shunted around the country to ensure her safety. Her own parents were declared recusants in 1586, the year after her birth. She was able to spend only seven or eight of her childhood years with her parents who were constantly on the move and whose home at Mulwith was burnt down in 1595.

First steps

Although there were no religious houses in England following the break with Rome, she nevertheless heard of and was attracted by convent life. Despite parental urgings she had turned down several offers of marriage by the time she was fifteen. She decided she would enter a convent against the initial advice of her confessor – even though this would mean leaving England – and eventually obtained her parents' permission to do so.

Her first stop was the Seminary of the English Jesuits at Saint-Omer in the Netherlands where she was persuaded to join the Walloon Poor Clares as a novice. After a year she was advised that she was not suited to this particular religious life and left, determined to found a Poor Clare monastery for English candidates.

Following negotiations with various magistrates, bishops and archdukes she succeeded in her aim and entered her own foundation as a postulant. (At the time of the French Revolution the English Poor Clares moved to Darlington in their homeland, some 20 miles north of Mary's birthplace, where they can still be found today.)

The first Companions

In 1609 she returned to England and, for a few months, she attended the sick and assisted priests in hiding to administer the sacraments. When she returned to Saint-Omer she took with her a few like-minded Englishwomen, who became known as her „Companions“, and set up a school for the education of English girls. It was now that she decided to base her institute on Jesuit principles. Similar foundations followed at Liège, Cologne and Trier.

In 1621 Mary journeyed to Rome to present her plans for a new style of religious life for women, as missionaries free from enclosure, to Pope Gregory XV. Her proposals were not received with unanimous approval and the perception of „Jesuitesses“ free from enclosure was to prove anathema to many members of the church establishment for the rest of her life.

Meanwhile Mary opened schools in Rome, Naples and Perugia and continued to win women to her cause but, at the same time, continued to meet opposition from various quarters (notably the English clergy) as she persisted in refusing enclosure for the Institute. In 1625 she returned to the North with her hopes of acceptance dashed.

In Munich the Prince Elector Maximilian I suggested she open a school in his Residenzstadt – and the Paradeiserhaus became the most important foundation of her lifetime.

Vienna and Pressburg followed then, in 1628, she was invited to Prague where the Emperor was in favour of a Prague foundation – but the Nuncios wrote to Rome to complain about „this dangerous woman“.

Growing opposition

In July of that year, in the presence of the Pope, the Congregation of Propaganda decreed the closing of the Italian houses of the Institute because the absence of

enclosure was counter to Canon Law.

The following year, despite being in poor health, Mary travelled again to Rome to petition the Pope. To him she explained that while she was prepared to give up her Institute she could not alter it – with which the Pope and Cardinals at this time declared themselves satisfied. However, she now began to receive reports that her houses in the North were under threat of suppression and so returned there in 1630. On 13 January 1631 the harsh Bull of Suppression „Pastoralis Romani Pontificus“ was signed by Urban VIII; it declared the Institute “abolished forever”.

Imprisonment

Reports from the Cologne Nuncio at Liège had cast suspicion of disobedience, rebellion and heresy on Mary. These suspicions were passed on to the Inquisition and an order for her imprisonment was issued. On 7 February 1631 she was placed in a cell of the Poor Clare Angerkloster, Munich, where she was held for nine weeks. Her Companions were allowed to bring her food and letters – the latter containing secret messages written in lemon juice which could only be read when held up to a fire. In late March Mary became so ill that she received the last sacraments but by mid-April she was released and had recovered sufficiently to return to the Paradeiserhaus. Mary and her Companions submitted to the Pope’s will and gave up the Institute, an act which helped to improve relations with Rome, and was permitted to travel to that city again in the Autumn of 1631. During this visit she was cleared of all suspicion of heresy and was allowed to acquire a house and live there with her Companions, albeit in generally poor health.

In 1635 there came a slight turnaround in the fortunes of the Companions who had remained behind in Munich when the Elector granted them leave to return to teaching girls in a private capacity.

Return to England

In 1639 Mary returned to England settling at first in London. In 1642 she returned to her home county in a bid to escape the worst turmoil of the civil war. She died at Hewarth, York, on 30 January 1645 with her life’s work apparently destroyed.

The small communities she left behind continued to struggle on without the support of the Church. The tide finally turned in 1680 when the establishments at Augsburg and Munich were offered protection by the Bishops of Augsburg and Freising.

As the years passed there was a gradual softening of the attitude of Rome. New houses were founded at Burghausen in 1683, York in 1686, Mindelheim in 1701 and St Pölten in Austria in 1706.

In 1694 Rome was again petitioned to confirm the Institute and its constitutions. The petition was turned down on the grounds that „they are Jesuitesses suppressed by Urban VIII“.

The name of the Institute changed from English Virgins to English Ladies, to Institute of Mary and then to Institute of St. Mary.

Pope Benedict XIV improved the standing of the Institute in 1749 by recognising Franziska Hauser as General Superior of all the houses of the Institute while forbidding, out of respect for the Bull of Urban VIII, Mary Ward to be acknowledged as the Founder.

The Institute had to wait until 1877 before confirmation was finally granted by the Congregation of Propaganda Fide. But it was not until 1909 that Mary Ward was at last reinstated as Founder by Pope Pius X following a petition from the members and the Hierarchies of England and Germany.

Further reading

The Life of Mary Ward, M C E Chambers; Till God Will, Mary Ward Through Her

Writings; Journey Into Freedom, Essays in honour of the fourth centenary of her birth, Henriette Peters; Mary Ward, A world in contemplation, trans. Helen Butterworth.