

Homily given by Archbishop Vincent Nichols

Westminster Cathedral January 23 2010

Mary Ward 400 year Jubilee Celebration Mass

This is a wonderful and gracious occasion, as we celebrate at this Mass the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Sisters of Mary Ward.

Throughout this year of celebrations, the wide family of Mary Ward, so many of whom, both young and old, are gathered here today, have been reflecting on the life of this remarkable and courageous woman.

Here she is, a woman of such strength of mind and will – a leader indeed; a woman of generosity of spirit and action – a true servant of others; a woman of profound and enduring Christian faith – a true disciple of Christ.

These are characteristics which grew within her in the face of the all the difficulties she encountered: within the Church, within her own Institute and in the circumstances of religious persecution and civil war here in England.

She was truly a woman of Europe, equally at home in France, Belgium, Germany Austria, Italy as in England, at a time when European countries shared so much more than is often the case today. And this was also a time in which women's movements had been in evidence for over 200 years.

Yet of all the things that are fascinating about Mary Ward one has stood out for me: it is the picture of her shoes. After all, they say you can tell a great deal about a woman by her shoes! Her shoes are truly remarkable, and remarkably symbolic. I hope you have seen the pictures of them. They are tough, robust and durable, with soles of thick leather: after all she made three journeys to Rome, much of them on foot; they are personal, with soft leather tops so that they fitted her individually; they care not one jot for appearance or fashion but correspond to a much deeper conviction than the need to conform – a conviction that takes us to the heart of this heroic woman.

At heart, she was a pilgrim, a woman of journeys, journeys of discovery, journeys which she made with integrity, courage and unshakeable hope. There are, I think, three journeys that are we are to appreciate:

First, her journey to discover what God wanted of her. Secondly, her journey to live closely to Christ, to be with Him above all others. And the, thirdly, the journey she made into the heart of the Church which she knew has to be the context of faithful discipleship. Let's take each one in turn.

The turning points in Mary Ward's life were the moments when, in prayer, she sensed her discovery of the will of God. In May 1609 she experienced what she called her 'Glory Vision', the call to do 'some other thing'. Then, in 1611 she sensed the words: 'Take the same of the Society'. She wrote: 'These few words gave so great a light in that particular Institute, comfort and strength, and changed so the whole soul, as that it was impossible for me to doubt, but that they came from Him whose words are works.'

So the first journey became the struggle always to follow the will of God and this taught her the profound conviction expressed in these words of her: 'What disturbs me inwardly and makes me troubled does not come from God, but the spirit of God always brings with it freedom and great peace.'

Even in her imprisonment by the Church, with its harshness and suffering, that trust was not shaken so that she could write: 'Our Lord and Master is also our Father and gives no more than is ladylike and what is most easy to be borne.' This unshakeable faith is the fruit of that first journey, sustained by an unwavering focus on the will of God, no matter the opposition nor the quarter from which it came.

Her second journey lies just as deeply in her soul: the desire and the effort to live close to Christ, the Eternal Word of God made flesh, her brother and constant companion of the heart. One of her faithful women companions said of her: 'The name Jesus was her first and last word, the beginning and ending of all her prayers, her refuge in all dangers and her protection from all evil.' Her motto became 'Go close to Him'; she insisted 'I will give Him what I have and all that I need I will find in Him; and her pattern of prayer was simply: 'Abiding in Him, Listening to Him, or else presenting my concerns; Leaving myself, and all, in Him.' Her journey into true discipleship, expressed in strong service of others and in wholehearted companionship, was rooted in the daily practice of prayer such as this. It can be no different for us.

But perhaps it is her third journey which beguiles us the most: her journey into the heart of the Church, with all its tangles and trials, misunderstandings and accusations. She had to face disagreements and struggles with her early companions about the form of the institute; she faced rows and opposition from the clergy in this country and, of course, she lived through that tumultuous relationship with the Holy See which is only now resolved, with the full adopting of the Jesuit Constitution for her Institute, in 2003 and the formal recognition, in 2009, of her life as one of 'heroic virtue' and the proclamation of her as truly Venerable.

In this journey, one thing remains clear and consistent: her acknowledgement of, and loving respect for the Office of the Pope, the successor of Peter. Her three journeys to Rome are clear testimony of this, across the ministry of three Popes, Pope Paul V, Pope Gregory XV and Pope Urban VIII. In the exercise of their Office she acknowledged the focal point of unity for the Church, as we do this day. It was this

loving devotion, rooted in her prayer and love of the Lord, that brought such fruit in her life for the good of the Church and the service of so many throughout the world.

Today we thank God for the outstanding inspiration of this remarkable English woman – and for the testimony of her shoes! We ask God to continue to bless us today with women of these same qualities: of leadership, of service especially in education and of unswerving discipleship of Christ in the community of the Church. With Mary Ward may we pray this day:

‘You, O Lord know my heart! Make this heart complete as you would have it be. My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready! Put me where you want me to be. I am in your hand. Turn me this way or that, as you desire. I am yours, ready for everything.’
Amen