

MARY WARD: HOLINESS

Talk given by Pamela Ellis



Holiness is a rather slippery concept. Our English word 'holiness' comes from the same root as the words '**wholeness**' and '**health**', whereas the words for holiness in the languages of the Bible are connected with the idea of **separation** – a holy person or thing is someone or something **set apart**. And if we look at the history of holiness, certainly within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we can see that there is a constant **tension** between seeking holiness by withdrawal from the world and seeking it by engagement with and service to the world.

Mary Ward's story, of course, illustrates this dilemma beautifully, but in order to set it in **context**, I want first to take you on a quick gallop through the **history of holiness** from the Old Testament to Mary Ward's time.

This will inevitably involve a lot of simplification, but I think I can assure you the broad outlines are accurate.

Old Testament

The first thing to remember when talking about holiness is that ideas about holiness are first and foremost **ideas about God**. How we conceive of holiness derives from and reveals how we think of God. In early ancient Israel the predominant idea about God was that of **the Other**, mysterious, powerful and dangerous (ref. Uzziah, 2 Sam 6. 1-11).

In order to live safely with this perilous being, the ancient Israelites developed what is known as the '**holiness code**' found in Leviticus. This was primarily a set of **rules for the community**, because it was Israel as a whole that was called to be holy. Thus the rules were external and public, and defined Israel as separate from the surrounding nations. Within Israel distinctions were drawn between 'clean' and 'unclean' creatures and states of being, and ways of maintaining or restoring cleanliness were laid down. Thus the early idea of holiness involved **ritual purity**.

By the time of the **prophets**, however, a new emphasis was developing. The prophetic tradition, and particularly Isaiah, laid stress on **social justice** as an essential component of holiness. In this view, the holiness of Israel no longer depends on ritual purity or the correct performance of sacrifices, but on ethical behaviour, specifically on how the disadvantaged within the community are treated. In the very first chapter of Isaiah God says:

Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me ... Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Is 1.13, 16–17)

The prophet's words are, however, still addressed to the whole community of Israel. It is in the Wisdom tradition that we find the shift towards **personal morality** and in particular inner integrity, which is so characteristic of **Jesus' teaching**.

New Testament

By the time of Jesus the Jewish nation was, as so often in its history, under **foreign domination**. This meant that the impulse towards keeping holy by means of **separation** was very strong. The Essenes, the various resistance movements and the Pharisees all shared in different ways the desire to purify Israel from the pollution it was experiencing under the Romans.

The Pharisees did this by insisting on strict **adherence to the Law**, but this had the effect of excluding those who for one reason or another (poverty, ignorance, occupation) were unable to live up to the requirements of the Law. These **'sinners' and 'outcasts'** were regarded as outside the true Israel.

It was this division within Israel that Jesus challenged. Like the Pharisees, he understood that holiness is first and foremost an attribute of God, but while they stressed the otherness of God Jesus stressed **God's compassion**. By doing this he refocused the whole idea of holiness. If compassion is the quality of God we are called upon to recreate in our lives, then the pursuit of holiness becomes **inclusive rather than exclusive**. The challenge is no longer how to keep the rules but how to love as God loves, lavishly and unconditionally, and no one is excluded from this by virtue of their situation in life.

The contrast is beautifully brought out by Luke's story of the **woman who anointed Jesus**: his companions regard her with contempt as a 'sinner', but Jesus recognises and praises the love that has brought her to him.

For Jesus keeping the rules was much less important than **inner integrity**. He states quite clearly that it is what is inside a person that makes him or her holy, not what happens on the outside. For him the outer dimension of holiness was not performing the correct actions but **acting with compassion**. Thus the judgements in Mt 25 are based on how much love has been shown to those in need.

The idea of holiness found in the teachings of Jesus is **open and inclusive**, in that anyone could aspire to it, but it is also very challenging. The experience of the early church, however, pulled Christianity towards a more **exclusive** form of holiness.

The Early Church

Persecution was a reality for the church from the beginning. Martyrs were understood to be sharing the sufferings of Christ and to be taken immediately into heaven. Holiness thus came to be identified with **suffering**, and when the persecutions finally came to an end, other forms of suffering were sought to take its place.

The early church was also heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and in particular various strands of **Platonism**. Put simply, Platonism divided reality into two: the world of eternal and unchanging Ideas, which could be grasped by the mind, and the changeable material world in which the body functioned. This drove a wedge between mind and body, or between spirit and matter, with mind and spirit thought to be superior

to body and matter. This teaching, a form of **dualism**, had a long life within Christianity and a profound effect on the idea of holiness.

The identification of holiness with suffering and the exaltation of spirit over matter deeply affected the emerging practice of **monasticism**. The idea developed that only by extreme acts of self-denial could true holiness be achieved, which meant that those not free to pursue this way of life became a sort of 'second class' Christian.

There was also a serious effect on **women**, who found themselves being identified with the body and regarded by male ascetics as distractions from the path of purity. Men's own sexual desires were projected on to women, who were then blamed and vilified as temptresses. To aspire to a spiritual life, a woman had to renounce not simply sex but womanhood. Here is St Jerome on women:

As long as a woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman, and will be called man.

Here is a very explicit **Christian dualism**, with man and soul on the 'good' side and woman and body on the 'bad' side of the divide.

By the end of the first millennium the **monastic way** was firmly established as the ideal Christian life. Priestly celibacy became compulsory in the 11th century and those priests who had been quite legitimately married were forced to give up their wives, who were seen not merely as distractions from the priestly ministry but as agents of the devil. Alongside this development came the increasingly strict **enclosure** of nuns, which was fully enforced by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

But while the general tendency within the Middle Ages was towards a **hierarchy of holiness**, with celibate males at the top and married women at the bottom, there were counter-currents, often originating with the laity.

One example is that of the **Beguines**. These were groups of laywomen who in the 13th century began to live a new form of religious life outside the structures of the traditional convent. Their aim was to live a life of prayer combined with active service to the poor. By the mid 14th century they had been suppressed by the church.

Another example is the flowering of **mysticism** in the late Middle Ages, which often involved lay people and offered a direct experience of God. But the dominant tradition remained that of holiness as separation from the world, and it is this tradition that Mary Ward inherited.

It seemed to me most perfect to take the most austere Order

This quotation, written in 1620 but referring to a much earlier period, encapsulates Mary Ward's **original idea** of holiness. She had, in the early stages of her vocation, 'placed the whole of perfection' in the 'two virtues' of 'austerity and retirement'.

The reason she gives for this is revealing – and she gives it twice, once in her Autobiography and once in a letter to Mgr Albergati, from which the starting quotation is taken. She says she favoured **austerity and retirement** because she ‘saw not how a religious woman could do good to more than herself alone’. This derives directly from the **negative opinion of women’s spirituality** that had developed over the centuries: women were thought to be incapable of benefiting others, and while she appears to accept this, a little aside in the Autobiography tells us that she was not happy about it. She calls it ‘a penuriousness’ and says that she ‘resented it enough even then’.

It is this conventional idea of holiness as **complete separation** from the world and from bodily comfort, that dictated her decision to enter the Poor Clares. As she wrote in her Autobiography:

I was resolved within myself to take the most strict and secluded [Order], thinking and often saying that, as women did not know how to do good except to themselves, a penuriousness which I resented enough even then, I would do in good earnest what I did.

Always **whole-hearted** in her endeavours, Mary would do nothing by halves. If strict self-denial and enclosure were the only path to holiness available to her, then she would make sure she did the job properly. If God was calling her to the religious life then she would respond ‘not in part but altogether’.

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of his vocation **Ignatius of Loyola** had a similar idea of religious life. He wrote that to start with he thought

... holiness was entirely measured by exterior austerity of life and that he who did the most austere penances would be held in the divine estimation for the most holy.

Extreme asceticism was valued as the way to holiness for both sexes; but for women it was thought to be **the only way**. A life of service in and to the world was open to Ignatius but not to Mary Ward, however much she might have desired it.

I could do no good to others. If this could have been, I would have valued it above all.

Accepting the limitations set upon her, she settled into the life of the Poor Clare convent she had founded in Gravelines, feeling sure that she had found her way to holiness:

In [the Poor Clares] I intended to live and die for the reasons aforesaid ... in which practice I found singular content, now began to feel great tranquillity of mind, often comforted to think that after eleven years withholding and turbation, the rest of my days should be spent in quiet and with God alone.

God, as we know, had other plans, and it was when these plans came into **conflict** with the traditional idea of holiness as withdrawal from the world that Mary found herself having to **rethink** her understanding of holiness and begin to formulate new ideas for the new situation she found herself in.

I will do these things in love and freedom or leave them alone

Before coming to that new situation, I'm going to take you back to something that happened when Mary Ward was a **teenager**, but which is an **early indication** of how her spirituality would develop.

She records in her Autobiography that when she was 15 and newly aware that God was calling her to the religious life, she began to follow a programme of spiritual reading and intense prayer. Eventually she found herself in difficulties with scruples. Was she doing everything she could? Was she doing everything in the right or the best way? In this perplexity she arrived at an **insight** which is extraordinary for someone of her age and of her time. She writes:

God compassionated my simplicity, and in this anxiety gave me courage to reason in this manner with myself: these things are not of obligation but of devotion; and God is not pleased with certain acts made thus by constraint. To acquire my own quiet, therefore, I will do these things with love and freedom, or leave them alone.

She has arrived very early at two key components of her mature understanding of holiness: **love and freedom**. I said just now that this insight was unusual not just for someone of her young age, but for the age in which she lived. In the late 16th and early 17th century the dominant motive in moral theology was **fear**. People were taught to fear hell and to fear punishment, as a means of bringing them to God. Mary found this approach repellent. This is what she writes of the spiritual direction she received as a Poor Clare:

he guided my conscience entirely by the way of fear ... to labour through love even until death appeared to me easy, but fear with me made little impression.

For her, **love**, not fear, was the key to action; love for God leading to loving service to her neighbour.

As a teenager she realises that actions performed 'by constraint', that is out of fear of failure or punishment, have no spiritual value. Only acts arising out of love are pleasing to God. Love cannot be constrained or forced, nor is it produced by fear. It must be **freely chosen**, so Mary reasons, and arrives at this young age at one of the most important components of her idea of holiness: freedom.

In a reflection written in 1616 she expands on the nature of this freedom in the spiritual life:

One is free from all and desires only one, which is to love God, and here one remains free and contented ... being present to all, yet cleaving to nothing.

Here again **love and freedom are linked**: in the love of God we are free to be in a right relationship with other things: attentive to them but not clinging to them ('being present to all, yet cleaving to nothing').

As we will see, this freedom became a key to **solving the conundrum** she later found herself facing: how, as a woman, to be holy while active in the world .

It seems a clear and perfect estate to be had in this life ...

In 1615 Mary Ward wrote a long letter to her mentor, the Jesuit Fr Roger Lee. In it she describes what has become known as the ‘vision of the just soul’, though it was more a process of discernment than a vision as usually understood. In this letter she refers to something she calls the ‘**estate of justice**’, and says that this ‘estate’ is ‘altogether needful’ for the life of her Institute.

Mary is at pains to distinguish this state from the popular view of holiness as **ecstatic union** with God. Mary herself was no stranger to such experiences. At the time of the ‘Glory’ revelation she described herself as ‘abstracted out of my whole being’. But this is not what she is talking about here.

This letter to Roger Lee contains some **key words** for understanding MW’s developing idea of holiness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first one to appear is ‘**freedom**’:

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 happened also discovering that freedom that such a soul should have had to refer all to God.

We have already seen that freedom began to have a spiritual significance for her in her teens. Here she develops the concept with reference to the life of her Institute. Its members are to act freely, unconstrained by attachment to earthly things and in the liberty that flows from complete dependence on God.

Her use of the word ‘**justice**’ seems to derive from the concept of ‘original justice’, sometimes used at the time to describe the state of creation, and especially humanity, before the Fall. What is being described is a **state of harmony**, when everything was in balance, and in particular human desires and instincts were in accord with God’s will. In a later writing Mary describes

... the delicacy of that estate, where sense obeyed reason, and reason the divine will. Where was neither darkness of understanding nor inclination to evil. Whose work was the will of their master and whose satisfaction was that their God was pleased with them.

Mary Ward feels a great desire for a restoration, at least in some degree, of this lost harmony, through the life and work of her Institute, which sought a **balance** between the active and the contemplative life.

The third key word to appear in this letter is ‘**sincerity**’. She explains this in a memorable phrase:

That we be such as we appear, and appear such as we are.

This quality seems to her to be of fundamental importance for the members of her Institute. It is a state of being in which the inner and outer aspects of the person are in harmony. Today we might call it **integrity**. Mary sees that integrity is essential for members of her Institute, who have the difficult task of balancing an active with a contemplative life. It is also a quality that she herself possessed. A description of her written after her death says she was

whole in her labours, whole to herself, and whole to her neighbour.

and, reflecting on the rather less than candid behaviour of her early advisors in St Omer, she say of herself that

... so greatly have I from the first loved integrity that unless I had gone against my nature it would have been impossible for me to act half-heartedly in things of the soul, where all is intended and should be full and entire.

The concept of the 'estate of justice', which included the values of freedom and sincerity, resolved for Mary Ward the **conflict** between her longing for the quiet and union with God offered by the enclosed life, and the desire to do good for others. The union with God that she sought was the **union of her will with God's**. This for her was where true holiness lay. She saw no contradiction between freedom and the will of God: rather, seeking God's will was the **highest expression of freedom**.

The 'estate of justice' enabled her to see that the active religious life was not a poor relation of the contemplative way but offered its **own path to holiness** to those who committed themselves to it whole-heartedly.

Therefore I must and ever will stand for this verity: that women may be perfect.

Much of Mary Ward's thinking was developed as a **response** to the situations she found herself in. Her thoughts on the **holiness of women** are a good example of this. In 1617 her little community in St Omer had been much disturbed by a remark made by a visiting Jesuit to the effect that their initial enthusiasm was bound to fail: 'fervour will decay, and when all is done, they are but women'.

This hurtful comment gave rise to some of Mary Ward's most remarkable documents, now usually referred to as the '**But Women Conferences**'. In them she vigorously defends the capacity of women to 'do great things' and strive for perfection.

We must remember how **limited** was the idea of female holiness at the time. The only path to real holiness available to women was inside a convent, and a strictly enclosed convent at that. Only inside such a convent could women be safe from the temptations to which it was believed they were especially liable. Mary Ward's Institute challenged this idea.

In arguing that being female was not in itself a barrier to holiness she first of all takes up the idea of 'fervour'.

Fervour [is] not placed in the feelings but in a will to do well, which women may have as well as men.

She argues that fervour is not a feeling but 'a will to do well'. Feelings come and go and are largely outside our conscious control, and the initial rush of 'sweetness' that usually accompanies a religious vocation will not last. Both men and women will experience a loss of 'sweetness' over time. They should not however jump to the conclusion that this means they have lost their fervour. If they do lose fervour it is because they have lost their focus on what she calls 'verity'. This is a characteristic Mary Ward word, by which she means truth, the truth of God that she insists is available to both men and women.

As well as arguing that men and women are in the same boat as regards fervour, she goes on to claim that women are capable of the same achievements as men:

There is no such difference between men and women; yet women, may they not do great matters ...? And I hope in God it will be seen that women in time will do much.

Having said that, she makes it clear that doing 'great matters' is not essential for holiness:

This is verity: to do what we have to do well. Many think it nothing to do ordinary things. But for us it is. To do ordinary things well, to keep our Constitutions, and all other things that be ordinary in every office or employment whatsoever it be. To do it well: this is for us, and this by God's grace will maintain fervour.

This concept of holiness grounds it in **faithful attention to the task in hand**, however ordinary and insignificant that might seem to be.

She then returns to the specific problem of **women's holiness**, and puts her finger unerringly on the **heart of the problem**: that women internalise the negative opinions of men and become incapable of acting. Here is how she expresses this insight:

I would to God that all men understood this verity, that women, if they will, may be perfect, and if they would not make us believe we can do nothing and that we are 'but women', we might do great matters.

She accepts that there are limits placed on what women are allowed to do. For example they 'may not administer the sacraments nor preach in public churches'. But she goes on in great **indignation** to ask:

... but in all other things, wherein are we so inferior to other creatures that they should term us 'but women'? As if we were in all things inferior to some other creation, which I suppose to be men! Which I dare be bold to say is a lie, and, with respect to the good Father, may say it is an error.

So what does she suggest as the **way women can advance in holiness**? Her answer is simple:

Knowledge of verity is necessary, to love it and to effect it. ... Seek it for him, who is Verity. ... It is truth to know that God can and will effect all and all is easy in him.

Learning of itself will not avail. As she observes, many learned men fail in holiness because they do not apply what they have learned in their lives. She encourages her companions to focus rather on God; if they do this all becomes easy. **Complete trust in God** is the path they should take.

In the 'but women' conferences and also in her writings about the 'estate of justice', Mary Ward is working out a way in which women in religious life could be **active in the world**. In origin this was a response to the **plight of Catholics in England**:

... in the very distressed state of England ... women also should and can provide something more than ordinary in the face of the common need.

In order for women religious to be able to act in this situation Mary Ward had to radically **rethink contemporary ideas** about what a holy life for a woman might be. Because there was no question of traditional enclosed convents in England, and because any Catholic apostolate there had need of secrecy, mobility and independence of action, she had to argue that the conventional religious life was not appropriate for women religious who desired to serve their co-religionists. She took the **Ignatian ideal** of combining contemplation with action and applied it to women, insisting that it could be a path to holiness for them as well as for men.

Her insights into the issues and problems surrounding holiness, especially for women, remain **valid today**. Holiness as withdrawal from the world; holiness as engagement with the world in service: Mary Ward evolved an idea of holiness that **integrated** the two approaches in a balanced and harmonious whole that can still inspire today and is relevant to the lives of lay people as well as religious.

I would like to end with a quotation from the theologian Karl Rahner. It could almost have been written about Mary Ward.

[The saints] are the initiators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age.

Mary Ward identified the task and provided the model. It was not acceptable to the Church of her day, but it speaks to us powerfully today.