



## Mary Ward (1585-1645)

Mary Ward was born in England in 1585 into an upper class Catholic family, in a time of fierce religious passion and bigotry.

Like many Englishwomen from the higher classes, Mary Ward enjoyed greater freedom and independence than was available to women in most Catholic countries at that time. Contrary to the norm for women in those times, she had received a balanced classical education. Surrounded by strong recusant women who upheld the Catholic faith within their homes and communities in the face of persecution, imprisonment or execution, Mary Ward grew up with a firm belief in the capacity of women to contribute significantly to both Church and society. It is claimed, in fact, that one of the consequences of the lack of a formal Catholic church hierarchy in England during the Reformation was the opportunity it gave to lay people, such as Mary Ward, to exercise initiative.

It is therefore not surprising that Mary Ward was open to new ideas. She strove to establish a radically new way for women to live their commitment to God, and to the Church and its mission, in 'the first international experiment of active women religious'. Based on the Jesuit Formula, the religious order established by Mary Ward was ultimately called the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM). The education of girls was, and remains, a core aspect of the IBVM charism. Other aspects of the charism were articulated in Mary Ward's plan of the Institute, presented to Pope Gregory XV in 1621, which sought to:

- follow a mixed life of contemplation and apostolic activity;
- be subject to the Pope alone and not to the jurisdiction of a male religious order;
- dispense with enclosure in order to be able to pursue apostolic work;
- wear contemporary dress rather than a religious habit; and
- be able to dismiss members even after profession, for grave reasons.

Based on this charism, a network of IBVM convents and schools was quickly established throughout England and Europe, in Belgium, Bavaria, Austria, Hungary, and Italy. Yet the establishment of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary was not without its difficulties. As well as her ongoing battle with ill health, Mary Ward underwent perilous journeys on sea and land, 'challenge from within the group she founded, opposition from without, and imprisonment as a heretic'.

Despite these difficulties, her commitment to her vision for the Institute, which she saw as God's will for her, was unshakeable, as was her persistence. Finally, the Pope suppressed the Institute in 1631, causing the closure of all the Institute convents and schools and the disbanding of the nuns.

Mary Ward died in 1645, at the age of sixty, an apparent failure. It was only in 1909 that she was publicly acknowledged as foundress of the Institute.

To read more about Mary Ward and the IBVM, visit the [Loreto Australia and South East Asia website](#).