

Notes for Remarks for 400th Anniversary Mass May 03, 2009
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Diarmuid O'Murchu in his recent book, Ancestral Grace (Orbis), suggests that perhaps the crucial question to ask ourselves as we move into the future is whether we can ... and I quote ... "muster afresh the outrageous hope we have known so often and allow it to transform us once more in the amazing power of ancestral grace".

Surely as we IBVMs celebrate 400 years of life and ministry by followers of Mary Ward we have ample evidence of that outrageous hope and great cause to celebrate it.

Mary Ward's entire life was a painful struggle to do what she knew so clearly God wanted her to do ... to found a new form of religious life for women, flexible, mobile, autonomous, sanctioned by the Holy See, with a rule modeled on that of St Ignatius, free to meet the needs of time and place. But as Mary lay dying her dream was unfulfilled. She could have obtained approval, had she compromised, but she knew that that was not what God wanted her to do. Rather, she was content to die in apparent defeat in the outrageous hope that her women "in time to come would do much".

Mary's early companions, and the countless young women who followed them, kept her dream alive. Remaining faithful to their founder's vision, though forbidden by Papal Decree to recognize her as founder, her Sisters remained faithful to her vision for 300 years trusting in Mary Ward's words:

"What is not done in one year can be done in another. We must wait Almighty God's time and pleasure for we must follow ... not go before God."

Mary's outrageous hope and that of her followers was justified when, in 1909, Pope Pius X officially recognized her as founder of the Institute. So it is only for the last one hundred years in the four hundred years since the establishment of the first foundation in 1609, that we have been able to claim and name Mary Ward as our founder.

Mary Ward's gift was not just for IBVM but also for the whole Church and for the world.

Cardinal Bourne writing in 1921 said this:

It is a duty of gratitude to recall continually that the very existence of the modern educational and charitable congregations, such as we know them, in their countless multiplicity, was made possible by the supernatural foresight, heroic perseverance and terrible disappointments and sufferings of Mary Ward. To no one after their own founders do Religious owe a greater debt of gratitude than to Mary Ward.

The history of Loretto in Canada is another story of outrageous hope. Shortly after their arrival in Toronto, in 1847, three of the five brave Irish Loreto missionaries succumbed to the harsh living conditions of the new world leaving a young Teresa Dease to lead the Institute into the future of North America. The enormous contribution of these women and their followers, to Catholic education is well documented in the histories of the Canadian dioceses of London, Hamilton, St Catherine's, Toronto, Regina and Saskatoon. Many of us here today are living witness to the fruit of the labour of Mary Ward's followers and their fidelity to Mary Ward's vision of empowering women and educating the young, all for the greater glory of God.

Today Mary Ward women live and work in forty four countries on five continents and we in Canada celebrate with all of them this year. Was she alive now Mary Ward would be traversing not only the Alps and the English Channel but also the Andes and the Himalayas and all the great seas and oceans on the planet and she would be visiting the IBVM NGO Office at the United Nations.

Another thing O'Mirchu says in Ancestral Grace is that the Spirit calls us forth and lures us, not from the past but from the future. The Apostolic Exhortation, Vita Consecrata, puts the same thought this way:

You (Religious Congregations) have not only a glorious history to remember and recount but also a great history to be accomplished.

What history does IBVM have to accomplish four hundred years after our founding? This is a question that we have been addressing.

At the General Congregation in Lima in 2008 representatives of the world-wide Institute identified a threefold "call":

1st. Our Institute is called to a deeper place to listen to the passion of God and wrestle with the meaning of religious life today.

2nd. Our Institute is called to more relevant expressions of communion which reflect a relational God generous in gift, equality, diversity and outreach.

3rd Our Institute is called to sharpen its engagement with the Church and with the world.

In our IBVM Direction Statement we promise to commit energies and resources ... to promoting the dignity and liberation of all, particularly women and children; to challenging unjust systems and structures; to standing with those on the edges of society; to showing reverent care for the earth and all creation.

Here in Canada we have undertaken a realistic assessment of our strength and limitations, of our resources and liabilities. We have identified challenges and invitations for mission and ministry. We have re-examined our core values seen through the lens of the vision and charism of Mary Ward and their expressions in our heritage. We have set ourselves

to the task of re-imagining and re-imagining the IBVM so that we can be what the Church and the world need us to be and what God wants us to be in our time and our place just as Mary Ward was for her time and her place.

Our focus for ministry will be threefold: spirituality, education and justice. We have before our eyes the powerful statement from the 1971 Synod of Bishops:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel or in other words of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every form of oppression.

Our outrageous hope is that, if we are faithful followers of Mary Ward, with our hearts freely and firmly set on God, if we are as she was - lovers of truth and doers of justice here in our little part of the world, God will call young women to carry Mary Ward's gift and legacy into the future ... for another four hundred years.

Each of you here this afternoon has been part of our past. We thank you for coming to celebrate that past with us. We invite you too to be part of our future.

So to conclude I ask you to bow your heads once again to pray with us and for us that we can take our beautiful words off the paper on which we have written them and en flesh them in our lives for the good of God's people and for the greater glory of God.

Let us pray:

May God who bends over the earth breathing life into our lives bless us with energy. Amen

May God who is truth fill our minds and hearts making us women of integrity and justice. Amen

May God bless us all, now and forever. Amen