



«This is the story
of a saintly woman
condemned by the Church
she loved and
sought to serve.»

Marie Perle



Mary Ward
with her
parents

Mary Ward was born in 1585 into a staunchly Catholic Yorkshire family. The affectionate atmosphere of her home contrasted strongly with the harsh anti-Catholic laws imposed by the English government. It was a period when society could not envisage the peaceful co-existence of Catholics and Protestants. Hostility between the churches was sharpened in the later decades of the sixteenth century. The papal bull *Regnans in excelsis* of 1570 excommunicated Queen Elizabeth, and *ipso facto* released her subjects from their allegiance, thus casting all Catholics into the role of potential traitors. Elizabeth might have been Gloriana to her courtiers and Good Queen Bess to many of her subjects, but at heart she was a frightened woman, surrounded by hostile Catholic countries more powerful than England.

In 1588 the Spanish Armada, launched with a papal blessing and claiming to be a crusade, only served to endanger Catholics even more, and persecution became rife. The most heinous crime, punishable by the hideous death of hanging, drawing and quartering, was to be a priest saying Mass; to harbour a priest was to incur the death sentence; and a long list of further penal laws dealt with even such minor offences as the possession of small articles of devotion. Storm clouds hung over English Catholics.

In the wider world the skies were bright with promise, for the sixteenth century offered new lands to discover, uncharted liberties to enjoy, fresh avenues

of scholarship, of art and of science to explore. Mary Ward was not, however, primarily interested in the opportunities of the brave new world. In her early years her spiritual journey was on conventional lines; and like St. Teresa of Avila she first longed for martyrdom. When in her teens she heard of religious life, she put away her childish fancy and made a firm resolve: 'I thought the most perfect thing would be to take the most austere and secluded order'. But with maturity she came to realise that mere austerity was not enough. The simple pursuit of God's will could turn out to be more rigorous than any religious rule, and lead to an agony of mind and spirit greater than the martyrdom inflicted by rack, rope or knife.

Vocation:
listening to
Margaret
Garrett



She obtained her unwilling parents' permission and went across the English Channel to try her vocation in the relative safety of Flanders. Providence placed her with the Poor Clares at St Omer, among whom she was assigned the position of extern sister. As such, she was excluded from the Divine Office and from the daily round of prayer. Though disappointed at this, she performed her lowly task faithfully, and professed herself to be happy. But then she experienced a series of divine intimations which she followed faithfully, though sometimes groping in near darkness.

On the feast of St. Gregory, 12 March 1607, the Franciscan Visitor General was in the convent, and told her that it was not God's will that she should remain as an extern sister. As she had come to love the Poor

Clare Order, she left the house at St Omer, and founded a new Poor Clare house for Englishwomen in Gravelines, where she would have been content to spend the rest of her life as a choir sister. But on the feast of St. Athanasius, 2 May 1609, she became aware, with a spiritual shock, that God was asking of her 'some other thing', as yet undefined. Painfully she left Gravelines and returned to England.

Mary Ward
leaving for St
Omer 1606



On arrival, she spent some months in apostolic work, while collecting round her young friends prepared to associate with her in a new venture. Confirmation that some great task lay ahead came with a spiritual experience usually referred to as the 'Glory Vision'. While performing the homely act of dressing her hair, Mary fell into an ecstasy that lasted two hours and left her convinced that she had a mission, though she remained unenlightened as to its form:



I understood that the work to be done was not a Carmelite convent but a thing that would please God far more and give him greater glory than I can say, but I was not told any particulars about what the work was to be or how it was to be done.

The Glory
Vision 1609

Late in 1609, or possibly early in 1610, she returned to St Omer, taking with her a group that included Winefrid Wigmore, Susannah Rookwood, Jane Browne and Catherine Smith. The little group opened a school for girls, and practised great austerities, which, Mary explained, were not to be a permanent feature of their society, but rather a means of discovering God's will. This mode of living with every mark of religious life except enclosure raised a storm of criticism among the male, largely conservative clerics who came across them, and the companions were dubbed 'Galloping Girls'.