

REMARKS TO LORETTO ALUMNAE AND FEDERATION

There are stories that are told from generation to generation in families and the same is true of religious communities. There are stories told from generation to generation. The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary goes back many generations; in fact, nearly four hundred years. There is a story told about Mary Ward, the woman who started this institute back in 1609, in England.

As many of you know, back in the 1600s in England, it was not popular to be a Catholic. In fact, you could be hung, drawn and quartered if you were caught teaching the Catholic faith. Now, this woman, Mary Ward, not only spent her own time but gathered women around her to teach the Catholic faith or do other kinds of things that were needed. They did so many things that you might say she was put on the contemporary most wanted list. Never one to back off from a challenge, the story is told that Mary Ward, and a friend or two, went to visit an official, who could have imprisoned her, and finding this official not at home, Mary is said to have scratched her initials in a window of his palace with her diamond.

Now, I have loved that story since I was sixteen years old. I think I loved it because it is a story of courage but also a story of foolishness — a story of a woman who leaped in where others feared to tread. In every century, it seems to me, both courage and a little foolishness are needed to truly practise the Christian message. Lately, I have begun to reconsider that story and I believe that Mary scratched not only her initials on the window but, indeed, etched three words on the hearts and minds of her followers through generation after generation. I think that those three words are integrity, justice and freedom. In every century, now just as much as at the beginning when Jesus preached, those who follow the Gospel message must live integrity, justice and freedom.

Integrity! Justice! Freedom!

Integrity starts by looking at one's self. There is a story told in the Scripture of another Mary, Mary the Mother of Jesus, a story all of you are familiar with. When the angel came at the annunciation to tell Mary, to greet Mary as full of grace, Luke tells us that Mary asked herself what these words meant. She searched within for what this greeting could mean. Her sense of self, her integrity provided her with resources, with strength that she did not to hesitate to use. Mary pondered these events in her heart. Integrity! Wholeness — a sense of being a person who both possesses and searches for Truth — who is what she appears and appears such as she is.

Justice! What do the Scriptures tell us of justice in the life of Mary, the Mother of Jesus? We have only to reflect on Mary's great song, the Magnificat, which she speaks to her cousin, Elizabeth, when they are both expecting their first child. Pregnant with new life, Mary sings, "God has looked on me, an ordinary woman, put the mighty from their high places, and lifted up the powerless. God filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

Justice looks at life with a directness, a certain simplicity, a sense of wonder of creation and the profound mystery of human life, of the intrinsic worth of each woman and each man — of the human community.

Freedom! Does Mary, the Mother of Jesus, have anything to say about freedom — about freedom to refer all to God — about the freedom that belief in Jesus gives?

I believe that Mary speaks about freedom with her actions. But consider the story of Jesus' mother and his cousins wanting special access because they were family. She was mother. But Jesus says, "Who is my mother, my sister, my brother? She is my mother, my sister, my brother who follows me, who is my disciple".

Discipleship! This fact of Mary's life, of Mary Ward's life, of our life, being disciple, is freeing, is freedom.

Integrity! Justice! Freedom!

We of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who follow Jesus, the Christ, in the path begun centuries ago by courageous and foolish (?) women, both named Mary, claim these words: Integrity, Justice, Freedom as essential to our vision.

In the 1980s, we live out that vision in parishes, schools, dioceses; in hospitals, shelters, nursing homes — in Illinois, Michigan, Arizona, California, Florida, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Ontario and Saskatchewan.

We claim that vision of Integrity, Justice and Freedom when we stand with those who are powerless; when we work to change systems and persons; when we stand with those who are homeless, hungry or hopeless; when we teach children, adolescents, adults; when we visit the elderly, the ill, the lonely; when we lobby and write letters and search for remedies; when we find Christ with those with whom we pray and work and live.

My instructions were to say a few words about Mary in this Marian Year and about the Institute and not to say too many. Now I invite you to take just three words: Integrity, Justice, Freedom and live them your way. Claim your vision.

Eleanor Holland, IBVM - Superior General
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