

Welcome to the International Conference for Mary Ward Schools, in Rome

19 – 24.10.2008

‘With Mary Ward – teaching together, in Church and World.’

Dear Participants in our international conference on education,

dear Fr. Mertes SJ

Dear co-workers in our Mary Ward Schools – all over the world,

Dear friends and sisters of the Congregatio Jesu,

It is a joy for me to be able to welcome you today to our International Conference for Mary Ward Schools. We are particularly glad that Cardinal Grochowski, Prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Education, has agreed to be patron of this conference, and we hope to be able to greet him personally in the next few days.

The Education Conference already has a tradition behind it. After the conferences in Ascot, England, in 1995, and Loyola, Spain, in 2004, this is the third international event for Mary Ward Schools. A look at all of you shows the internationality of this conference. In this room there are representatives from four continents, from 17 different countries: from Asia, representatives from Korea, India and Nepal; from Latin America, from Argentina, Brazil and Chile; from Africa, Zimbabwe; from Europe, representatives from England, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Rumania, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic; and we greet also representatives from Jerusalem. Unfortunately this time the Loreto Schools are not able to take part. The large number, 180 participants, shows not only that there is great interest in this international conference, but also that the Mary Ward Schools are lively educational institutions, that have their finger on the pulse of our time.

It would be interesting to hear what moved each one of you to come here to Rome. Perhaps meeting internationally with people who teach in comparable or similar institutions? Perhaps it is the relevance of the subject - ‘With Mary Ward – teaching together, in Church and World.’? Perhaps it is the place – Rome, the international city, the centre of the Church? Perhaps there is also interest in becoming more closely united in an international network of Mary Ward Schools, and the expectation of learning more about it, so as to enable your own school, through fresh encouragement, to take part in the broad international scene.

In the formulation of the topic we also had the Mary Ward Jubilee 2009 – 2011 in mind, with a view to creating new awareness of the pedagogical concerns of Mary Ward, this pioneer in education for girls. We hope that this conference will spur you on to celebrate the jubilee in your school. Each of you will be given a short biography of Mary Ward, that perhaps you can pass on in the Jubilee Year to school-leavers, or to parents’ groups and friends.

The theme of our conference, ‘With Mary Ward – teaching together’ looks at the school profile of the Mary Ward Schools. In the few years of her work Mary Ward founded schools all over Europe, from St. Omer and Liège in Flanders, via Cologne, Trier, Munich, Bratislava and Vienna to Perugia, Rome and Naples. Let me look briefly at Mary Ward’s goals in her educational work, and ask if they still have anything to say to us today, after 400 years - if the network of schools that Mary Ward had in mind still holds good.

Mary Ward was concerned first of all about education for girls, about equal educational opportunities for women, for whom at that time there were no educational openings. She did not want to offer education only to girls from wealthy families; she also opened elementary schools for the poor. But she aimed at schooling of a high standard, to help young women to human maturity. The girls were to learn everything that could help them later to shape their lives as women and to take responsibility. Mary Ward was convinced that women also, on the basis of a thorough education, could make an important contribution in Church and society. According to her educational plans, education was based, naturally, on the Christian concept of a human being. It was a great concern for her that on this foundation Christian values should be practised in the school. The teaching content was based on the so-called ‘liberal arts’, which in the educational system of

that time were the requirement for all scholarly work – but for this there was no opportunity open to girls. . It was a new, ambitious plan at that time. Thereby she set high expectations on teachers and pupils, because she recognised the great significance of good education for the women of her time.

So Mary Ward's disappointment must have been great when she realised that her concept of education for women, welcomed indeed by the secular rulers, and considered important for the organisation of Church and society at that time, met with hostility in spiritual circles, out of fear that women might step out of their allotted places. (M. Immolata Wetter). So we read among the charges against Mary Ward and her Institute, for example, that the women taught Latin, that they allowed the pupils act in plays, and organised exercises in rhetoric. Learning foreign languages played an important part in Mary Ward's idea of a school: English, French, Italian and German were of course part of this educational plan. All this offended against female modesty – particularly for religious women – at that time. It is understandable that Mary Ward could find no reason why acquiring intellectual knowledge should be immoral and against womanly virtue. The importance of a high standard of education, a holistic, Christian moral formation, and equal educational opportunities for all – these are questions still relevant today, questions which we must ask ourselves! Yes, Mary Ward was far ahead of her time.

Education and training concern many people today. Those responsible in the Church, especially, set great store by the school for Christian shaping of the future in our global world. For that reason we see the work of secular colleagues in a new light and value their great commitment in the educational sphere as an indispensable contribution. For, if the younger generation is to collaborate in the shaping of our global world, we need to enable the young people of TODAY to be responsible for TOMORROW.

The goals of education would certainly be formulated differently today than in Mary Ward's time. But if we listen carefully, we discover many similarities:

- There is the talk of **school as 'place of integration'** ; of the **formation and strengthening of individual identity**, of **holistic education and formation**, aimed at intellectual, moral and spiritual development, and at the transmission of Christian values.

- Young people must be enabled to **engage** in public life, to show **solidarity**, and to question **reality** critically.

- There is talk of enabling the young people in our schools to develop a conscious understanding of **their own culture**, to **respect other cultures** and to recognise the riches of history and the value of their own and of foreign cultures. The younger generation needs to be prepared to build a shared, peaceful future **from this intercultural vision**.

- **Access to education of high quality for all**, and lifelong learning in a more human and more just society are part of the millennium goals, and must be guaranteed in a particular way through the Mary Ward Schools.- And there, once again, we are very close to Mary Ward's formulation of goals.

'With Mary Ward – teaching together, in Church and World.' This theme, then, also challenges us today. We must ask ourselves whether the **school network** that Mary Ward began 400years ago is still relevant, and how it can be used more effectively. With her concept of education, Mary Ward was far ahead of her time. Are we ahead of our time in our concept of school, or are we more inclined to lag behind educational requirements and needs? Certainly in these days you will receive much new stimulus. So I hope that you will find ways of 'going ahead together'.

I hope you will have time and space to get to know one another and to build contacts, so that the worldwide network of Mary Ward Schools may be strengthened, so that it can offer a contribution to the fashioning of our global world. I wish you a successful conference in a congenial atmosphere.