



## Spirituality – Newsletter 29 January 2021

***“Show yourself at all times glad and joyful,  
for almighty God loves a cheerful giver”***

***Mary Ward***

Over four hundred years ago, Mary Ward, the foundress of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, left us a sure and certain pathway into authentic Christian spirituality and living. The Values she spoke of, and indeed lived, are a well-trod way into the heart of all that Jesus taught and invited us into. Those Values are Sincerity, Justice, Freedom, Verity and Felicity. This year all Loreto schools in Australia are celebrating the Value of Felicity. This means that as a Loreto community - staff, students and parents - we have embarked upon a journey into just what it means to live in the way of Felicity, as Mary Ward understood it and lived it herself. What a wonderful opportunity to reflect upon and deepen our own Christian stance in life and our fleshing-out of what we are called to. I say this because the way of Felicity is firmly grounded in the Christian spiritual tradition, and following this path will surely take us into the heart of what it is to live a deeply Christian life.

Our Loreto Schools Mission statement has some wonderfully uplifting words about what Felicity is. Felicity, we are told, manifests itself in joy, cheerfulness, good humour, happiness, hope, friendliness, courtesy, positive thinking, inner peace, courage, optimism, open-heartedness, light-heartedness and self-acceptance. These are what we might call the symptoms of Felicity. They are attractive qualities, I'm sure you'll agree. It's easy to warm to Felicity! However, the more I reflect on Felicity the more I am aware that it is possibly the most demanding of Mary Ward's Values because we can't possibly sustain all that without something very primary and essential to us that we are rooted in and from which we draw, day by day, amidst the oft-experienced chaos, or mundaneness, or the surprises of life.

Life throws much at us, as we well know and as we are all experiencing right now. Things do not always go our way. Each one of us will surely know times of struggle, anxiety, fear, concern for loved ones, illness and loss. It can be hard to be cheerful at such times or to sustain inner peace. We only have to tune in to the latest news report each day to feel bombarded by the darker aspect of humanity's choices. Daily we see and hear stories of suffering, cruelty, injustice, greed, power, desperation and utter sadness, one after the other. How do we remain open-hearted and hope-filled when we witness the tragedies befalling others? How can we feel light-hearted when we are anxious and fretful? In the face of so much pain and darkness in our world our default position can all too often be a heaviness of heart, a gloominess. We can sink into a lacklustre way of living, into a closed-hearted self-preservation and a kind of 'plodding along'. All these things are quite contrary to what Mary Ward spoke of and indeed the way she herself lived.



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Felicity, if it is to be embraced at all, must be firmly grounded and lived in our everyday lives, such as they are. Felicity is not about being 'upbeat' all the time. No one can really sustain that. Felicity is also not dependent on whether things are going well for us, whether we have all we want. It's easy to be cheerful in those situations. It's not always the result of natural optimism. Mary Ward's story shows us that there is something much more constant and ever-present at the heart of our lives that makes Felicity possible. Confronted with ill health, criticism of her work and condemnation by the Church she so loved and served, believing that she had been a failure, her capacity for joy, open-heartedness, hope and optimism was nevertheless boundless. What was at the heart of this? And what can we, immersed as we are in twenty-first century living, learn from this sixteenth century woman?

Marlene Marburg, in a few stunningly beautiful lines, captures this perfectly. She calls it "serious joy":

You know about serious joy  
deep in the chambers of the heart.  
It can't be ignored.  
It is a piece of God's own heart  
thrown to you with dart precision.  
And when it pierces your heart,  
God sings the sound  
consoling you, filling you  
as if with an angel's soft sigh.  
Let God sink into you;  
Sink into God where there are few words or none at all.  
Feel the work gentling your trust;  
The grace is for you.

At the core of Mary Ward's life was certainly 'a piece of God's own heart'. She let God sing the sound – and above all she listened to that sound. Her story shows us that Felicity is possible, even when we are pulled about by many things, and when what may be happening around us is overwhelmingly dark and frightening.

Mary lived in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, a time when Catholics were hunted down and persecuted, when the possibility of dying for one's faith was very real and was happening all around her. As a child Mary was fascinated with the idea of martyrdom for her faith, but as she matured she listened more and more deeply to what she called 'God's dream for her', and as she said, felt a longing to respond to this invitation. From a young age she knew she wanted to give her all to God by becoming a nun, and later when she established the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary she encouraged all the women who joined her in her endeavour to shine brightly to the world. From within this abandonment to God's dream for her, this sinking into God, Mary found her joy and gratitude. There was no 'what will become of me?' or, 'why couldn't this have happened to someone else?' but only deeply felt conviction that she was blessed, that in this encounter of Jesus dwelling in her, of God creating with her, there was hope and joy.



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And so it became Mary's way to, "show yourself at all times glad and joyful, for almighty God loves a cheerful giver".

Mary knew many dark days. While imprisoned in the Anger Convent in Munich in 1631, she wrote to her companions nearby: "I am in an enclosed convent, I know, and totally confined. Sometimes we fry, sometimes we freeze, and in this one room we do everything we have to do. Mass and the Sacraments are delights denied us. But despite this, our dwelling contains all we could wish for. I marvel at the fact that I can say this, but our Lord and Master, who is also a loving parent, respects our capacities as women and asks no more of us than we can bear with ease". It is inspiring that during such trying times she was able to adopt such a positive attitude. It demonstrates not only her capacity, but also her willingness and courage to choose to do so. "Banish all inordinate sadness, showing always a cheerful temperament", she said.

Mary's conviction that she was utterly loved by God coloured all her relationships. Her open-heartedness extended not only to those who were most dear to her but to everyone. Rather than be driven by resentment, bitterness, anger or fear, her joy-filled nature reflected an enormous capacity for forgiveness and reconciliation. When she had received any injury, it was her special care first to find within herself an entire pardon of that person, deep and heartfelt, then to pray for them and seek out occasion to render them service. "If anyone gives you trouble, meet him with friendly words, for so you will soften both yourself and him", she wrote.

What a legacy we have! And three centuries later, Mother Gonzaga Barry, who established the Loreto Foundations here in Australia, wrote about Felicity in a Christmas letter: "The happiest heart is childlike", she said, "it never quite grows old; it sees the sunset's splendour as it saw the dawning gold; it has a gift of gladness, its dreams die not away".

Reflecting on the life and spirit of this remarkable woman, Mary Ward, we see so powerfully that she certainly and most authentically embodied the words of Jesus in John's Gospel: "that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete". We see so much of this joy in her writings too, in her choices and her attitudes. The question for us today is, of course, how we too might grow into Felicity. How might we avoid the 'if only's' and the 'what ifs' that can so often beset us? How might we adopt the 'even though' attitude? What do we need to do, what attitudes might we nurture so that our own lives really do embody those wonderful characteristics even though all might not be as we would have liked, so that our joy may be deep-seated and not vanish with changing fortunes.

To explore this, I am hoping to take you on a journey into Felicity over the next few weeks, a journey into what it means to develop a spirituality of joy, openness, courage and positivity. I think the best way to explore this is through stories. Stories are invitational, a powerful way of drawing us into understanding and truth. But they also take us beyond the head into a heart place, and touch us and speak to us on many levels: they speak to our dreams, our needs and fears and, if we let them, they will lead us into



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something new. The stories I've chosen are very simple: something biblical to start with, then something from the film, *Chocolat*, and following that, a short extract from *The Little Prince* by Antoine De Saint Exupery. Perhaps some of these stories, or a few words or an image, may just speak to you wherever you are at that moment and hopefully leave you with a few thoughts and ideas that you can further explore in your own journey this year into what it means to live in the fullness of joy that Jesus invites us into.

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