

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 10, 2008 at 2:17pm

The holy women of York

by Dana Greene

After London, York is England's most visited city, and with reason. It is beautiful, historic and bustling, a port city of some 180,000 people built at the confluence of the rivers Ouse and Foss. Tourists pour in to admire York's Gothic Minster, the largest in northern Europe, and its massive walls, first constructed by the Romans, offer a three-mile treetop view of ancient ruins and a thriving metropolis. Entering the city through one of its many gates or "bars," one finds the Shambles, a medieval commercial lane, next to Marks & Spencer, the popular British retailer, and the remains of the 16th-century Benedictine abbey of St. Mary's a few paces from the city's modern archaeological museum. Cheek by jowl, old and new coexist, offering those with eyes to see the opportunity to enter the past and encounter the treasures buried there.

For Catholics the treasures of York are many. Throughout its long history, it was the most Catholic of English cities. An early center of Christian faith, it was also home to recusants, those 16th-century Catholics who resisted both Anglicanism and Puritan authority. In the lore of the city and its archaeological remains, one finds buried three Catholic women who continue to be revered. Although their circumstances and contributions differ, each lived at a time of peril and tumult, and each shaped a life that was wise and prophetic. These holy women of York not only offer access to the city's rich history, but inspiration for all those living in perilous and tumultuous times.



The most distant of the three is Hild(a), who is

commemorated in York's Minster where she was baptized. She spent most of her life at the edge of the shire in Whitby. Today, Whitby is a resort town, its main attractions being an early home of Capt. James Cook and the ruins of the abbey Hild founded in the seventh century, which perch on a bluff facing the blustery North Sea. What is known of this extraordinary woman, abbess of a double monastery of women and men, comes from the historian Venerable Bede, who chronicled the development of the early English church, including the contributions of this woman called "Mother" by all who knew and revered her.

After the end of invasions by Angles and Saxons, the early church faced a triple threat: continued jockeying for power among local political forces; the need to evangelize non-Christian peoples, and divisions within the nascent Christian church itself. Hild met each of these challenges. Renowned for her wisdom, she was sought out by kings and princes who came to her for advice and in the process became supporters. Attuned to the pressing need to spread the Gospel, Hild nurtured missionary efforts, encouraging the genius of Caedmon, a cowherd turned poet-monk, who put scripture to poetry in order to evangelize the folk. The lyricism of Caedmon spread Christianity, ensuring his fame as first among English poets.

It was within Hild's monastery that the Synod of Whitby was convened in 664. While the issue at hand seems arcane to the contemporary mind, the outcome of the synod was important for the unity of the Christian church. In this early context, the divisions between Celtic Christianity, emanating from Iona, and Roman Christianity were still pronounced. The immediate issue was how to compute the date for the celebration of Easter. Although Hild herself probably favored a Celtic computation, the issue was decided in favor of Rome and the threatened division between rival factions was averted. Hild died in 680, having suffered illness for many years.

The English church grew stronger in the early Middle Ages even as it endured the invasions of Vikings and Normans and the consolidation of political power by ambitious monarchs. With the ascension of the Tudors, however, the independence of the church was challenged, first by Henry VIII, and then by Elizabeth. The wealthy monasteries of York were closed, and the Anglican church was established. Catholicism in the north was resistant to these changes, and the suffering endured by York's papists was considerable.



That suffering is graphically illustrated in the life of Margaret Clitherow, wife of a prosperous butcher who lived in a house on the Shambles near Newgate Market. As a convert to Catholicism, Margaret refused to attend Protestant services and aided the remnant Catholic community by hiding fugitive priests in her home and allowing Mass to be said there. Found guilty of violating the Penal Laws, she was fined, imprisoned for two years, and finally sentenced to death. She was 30 years old and the mother of three. Stripped, and then pressed until she suffocated, "the pearl of York," as she was called, became the first Catholic woman to be martyred by the Tudor government. Others would follow. Today, with the din of the cobbled Shambles in the background, one can stop and remember Margaret Clitherow in the small chapel in what is reputed to be her 16th-century home. A relic of her body is housed in St. Mary's Convent elsewhere in the city.

In death, both Hild and Margaret Clitherow are revered as saints. This was not to be for Mary Ward, even though her prophetic vision and suffering matched that of her Yorkshire sisters.

Beautiful and of prominent lineage, Mary Ward was destined for marriage but refused it, ultimately persuading her parents to allow her to clandestinely travel to Belgium where she could enter the convent as a lay sister of the Poor Clares. She was miserable until the benediction of a religious superior finally released her from her vows. Mary Ward's vision was to found a new community in which women religious would be free of enclosure, free to establish schools for poor girls, free of monastic restrictions and free from jurisdiction of local ecclesial authority. In the 17th century, this vision was preposterous. Nonetheless, Mary Ward, age 24, persisted. She surreptitiously returned to England to recruit followers to her Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and with them traveled to the continent where she established a number of schools. She developed a rule modeled on the newly established Jesuit order and then began petitioning the papacy for recognition, one time even walking 1,500 miles from Brussels to Rome to do so.

Ultimately thwarted in her efforts, she wrote of her "long loneliness" as she endured suspicion, rejection, betrayal, condemnation and imprisonment, not by secular powers but by the church she served. Secular clergy condemned her as the leader of Jesuitical ladies. The Jesuits withdrew their initial support. Jealousy within the institute resulted in betrayal, and years of petitioning the papacy for recognition came to nothing. In fact, in 1631 Urban VIII suppressed the "pernicious" institute, imprisoned Mary Ward, and condemned her as "heretic, schismatic and rebel against holy church."

Finally released, she returned to England where she had the support of the Catholic Queen Henrietta Maria. But Cromwell's army soon gained control of England, engulfing the country in war and besieging

York, where Mary Ward had taken refuge. She died in 1645, a seeming failure.

Vindication of her life and work was slow in coming. In 1703, suppression of the institute finally was removed, and in 1909 she was acclaimed its founder. Belatedly, in 1951, Pius XII acknowledged Mary Ward as "that incomparable woman given to the church by England in its most somber and bloodstained years."

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The shards of Mary Ward's prophetic life are scattered throughout the city of York. A stone in the Anglican church in nearby Osbaldwick indicates she is buried there in an unmarked grave. The Bar Convent at Mickelgate, home of the Mary Ward nuns, the oldest active convent in England, offers visitors hospitality for body and soul, and the convent's museum chronicles the history of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the splendid irony of Mary Ward's life.

If one travels light, is equipped with imagination, and wants to find inspiration in the past, the city of York offers the visitor the opportunity to become a pilgrim. Like other pilgrims through the ages, the contemporary seeker can uncover in this most Catholic of English cities the inspiration of holy women who triumphed in perilous and chaotic times.

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