

Mary MacKillop, the Teacher

In 1866 Father Julian Woods invited Mary MacKillop to come to Penola to take charge of his Catholic School and become the first Sister of St Joseph. He had decided to found the Institute as his response to Bishop Patrick Geoghegan's plea:

Wherever there is a Pastor and a Flock, we implore you to make a commencement of a Catholic school. Let each do what he can.'

Why, then, did Woods ask Mary? Because she was a woman of deep faith with a longing for religious life and, perhaps even more importantly, because she was a born teacher.

As the eldest of eight children, Mary had learnt to manage and care for younger children while very young herself. She was well-educated, despite the fact that she had been unable to attend school regularly and had been called upon to help support her family from an early age. However, she had received a thorough grounding in her faith from her well-educated father and was an avid reader. As a teenager she had worked as a governess for several different families, and was quite an experienced teacher when, at eighteen, she came to work with her Cameron cousins at Penola in the South East of South Australia and first met Woods. She stayed for almost two years.

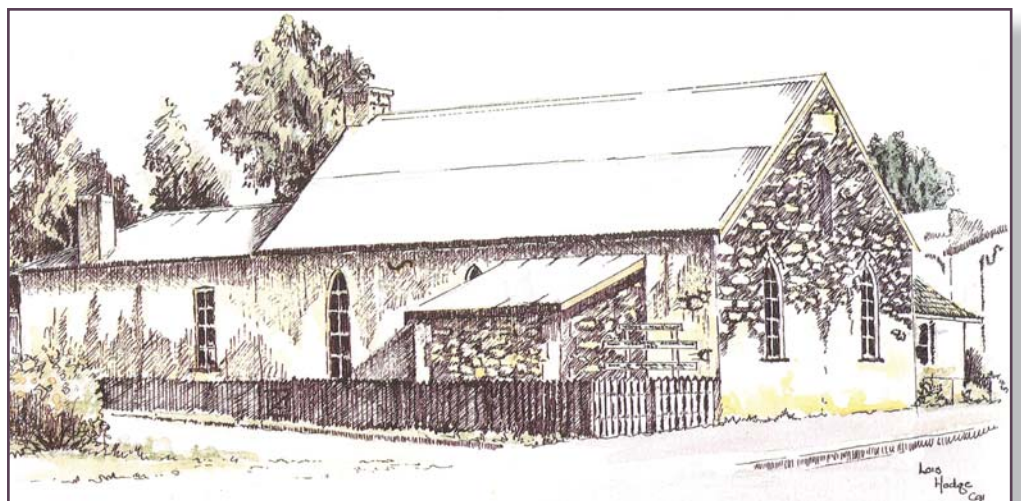
Mary commanded these children's respect and one commented: You could not face Cousin Mary with ill-done work; she would give you a look you couldn't forget.² They knew that she loved and respected them and noted how, at the end of the school day, she went to the workers' huts and taught their children basic numeracy and literacy skills. In particular, she took an interest in the Aboriginal children camping on the property. One little girl, Nancy Bruce, never forgot Mary and how she helped her leave Penola and find suitable work elsewhere.

In due course, Mary completed her time with the Camerons and moved to Portland in Western Victoria where her family had settled recently. At twenty-two, she gained a position as assistant teacher in the Catholic Denominational School there, even though she had no formal qualifications and had been unable to study. She placed all in God's hands as she sat the required exam and, as a result, was selected ahead of a trained teacher from Ireland. Her time in Portland had an important formative influence on her as a teacher and as one who insisted on the absolute refusal of government funding for her schools.

At that time, all Victorian state and denominational schools received government grants for teachers' wages according to a system of payment by results. Thus, the amount allocated to a school depended on the standard of the children's work as demonstrated at the inspector's annual visit. It seems that Mary's headmaster was less conscientious than his young assistant and that, when the inspector was due, he took the smarter, better drilled pupils from her class and replaced them with backward ones from his. Consequently, he received a glowing report with promise of maximum funding for his school.

He had forgotten, however, that Mary's eleven-year-old brother, Donald, was in his class. The little boy was outraged at the unfair treatment meted out to his big sister and reported the incident to his father who was infuriated and took the teacher to task. Consequently, Mary lost her job at the school and gained a healthy mistrust of any form of government funding with strings attached. On the positive side, the loss of her job and the negative repercussions surrounding that event enabled her to accept Woods' invitation to come to Penola to manage his school and become the first Josephite.

Like all Victorian Catholic Schools, this one had a set curriculum and time-table. Mary used



these conscientiously, noting their weaknesses and strengths and she remembered them well. Therefore, when Woods asked her to help him design a curriculum and time-table for the catholic schools in South Australia, she reproduced them with some modifications, commenting to Woods that her curriculum was similar to the one in use in Victoria although her standards were higher, but not too high for the children to achieve. It is now impossible to gauge whether her claims were justified but we know that she ran a good school at Penola and later on, in Adelaide.

Mary always prepared her lessons well, but she was not an innovator regarding teaching methods. However, innovation was scarcely necessary because family circumstances made it impossible for many children to attend school regularly or for long. This being the case, Mary and her teachers had to make the best use of their time, and the monitorial system then in vogue was eminently suited to this end. Thus, they taught the children from their books and had them repeat their lessons by rote for the first four days of each week. Then, on Fridays, they revised and consolidated the week's work. Their overall aim was to enable the children to read and understand an ordinary newspaper, write simple letters correctly and manage their business and financial affairs satisfactorily.

Throughout her life Mary made sure that the sisters had suitable text books. Initially, Woods imported texts from overseas and, where none were available, wrote some himself. With time, she too, began ordering texts through local importers and booksellers. Thus, when in Queensland in 1870, she wrote:

I forgot to ask Mr Pole to send for some Grammars and Geographies, but will send him the order this week, and then he will have to send for them. We shall require at least four dozen of each. He has been able to get Burns & Lamberts books in Sydney, and we are gradually getting them into use in the schools³

Mary's schools were for the children of the poor or, at best, of the hardworking labouring man. Therefore, she was adamant that the curriculum should not include higher branches of learning such as music or languages. She claimed to have seen many instances where poor parents had laid out money on music lessons,

thus giving their poor children ideas so totally opposed to their positions in life, and at the

same time invariably neglecting the essential things, that as a natural consequence the children grew up dissatisfied with their state, ashamed of their parents, and, where they did not go step by step to open ruin, they fell little short of it and were anything but what Catholic young women should be.⁴

Throughout each day, Mary integrated the religious and the secular in such a way that, as Archbishop Polding of Sydney put it, the children:

learn(t) reading, writing and arithmetic and history and whatever else (might) be thought desirable, as Roman Catholic children learning these things, and this they (could not) do unless they (were) constantly breathing the atmosphere of their religion.⁵

She gave prayer and religious instruction pride of place and made the best of every opportunity for training the children in piety. Vocal prayer and hymn singing featured in the daily timetable. However, because she had a natural understanding of young children's needs, she ensured that prayers were not too long, and encouraged the sisters to organise special celebrations on the more important Church feasts. All were designed to give the children a sense of identity as catholics and to help them perceive that religion was part of life rather than something reserved for church on Sundays.

During her time in Portland, Mary kept in touch with Woods, to whom she had confided her longing for religious life in an Order devoted to the welfare of the poor. As she put it:

Circumstances, as well as choice, having for many years compelled me to live as a teacher, I saw so much of the evils attending a merely secular course of education that all my desires seemed to centre in a wish to devote myself to poor children and the afflicted poor in some very poor order.⁶

She did well in her first school, in a modified stable at Penola and, when Bishop Lawrence Sheil of Adelaide visited there in January 1871, he was impressed with the children's general behaviour and their religious knowledge. As a consequence, he tacitly approved the foundation of the Sisters of St Joseph by addressing their teacher as Sister Mary and he appointed Woods the Director General of Catholic Education and Inspector of Schools for the diocese. This meant that he had to move to Adelaide

As he began work, he found there was no properly

organised school system in the colony. Generally, standards were poor, buildings and equipment were substandard and very few of the teachers were properly trained. In his frustration, he dismissed several young women from their positions, telling them that they could resume teaching only after they had spent some time working with Mary as student teachers. Mary was far away in Penola and so these women and their friends protested loudly and publicly over the way he had treated them.

He soon realised that he could not manage without Mary's assistance. Therefore, he called her to the city to formalise a suitable curriculum and time-table and to train the teachers. He gave her charge of the St Francis Xavier Cathedral Hall School in the centre of Adelaide, where she began teaching on 2 July 1867. Almost immediately, standards began to improve, a flood of young women applied to become Sisters of St Joseph and soon their schools became noted for their standards of excellence and their concern for the children.

Initially, both Woods and Mary intended that all prospective Josephites should spend some time at her school, learning her methods and mastering the curriculum and time-table. Unfortunately, he was so overwhelmed by the volume of work needing to be done that he refused to wait for these women to complete their training before he appointed them to schools of their own, often at some distance from Adelaide. He sent them out with little more than the Josephite Rule Book in one hand and the school curriculum and time-table in the other. Consequently, by the end of 1867 Mary found it necessary to give up the classroom teaching she loved and become an itinerant schools supervisor. Never again was she able to undertake direct classroom teaching.

Instead, she spent her time visiting the new sisters in their schools and demonstrating to them the various lessons. When she could not visit, she wrote out the lessons and sent them to the sisters by post. She was, in fact, running a correspondence course in teaching and the evidence suggests that, with time and Mary's encouragement, many of these women became fine teachers who, like Mary, had a strong sense of the dignity and worth of the children in their

classes and respected them accordingly.

This was very important for, as it was expressed in their Rule of Life, the Sisters of St Joseph had been founded *for the pious education of children whose parents (were) in humble circumstances.*⁷ The Rule decreed that the sisters were to recognise the Infant Jesus in their pupils and to care for them as St Joseph cared for Jesus. They were to appear happy in the presence of the children, speak to them gently and refuse to be annoyed by their noise and perverseness. In fact, in every situation, they were to *do all the good they (could) and never see an evil without trying how they (might) remedy it. ... Like our Blessed Lord, (they were to) reject no one.*⁸

Mary herself demonstrated her great love for children and also her determination to give them a good education for life. On her first day at the Hall School in Adelaide about sixty children attended. Over subsequent days, as she and the sisters visited these children's families; they noticed a number of poorly clad children playing in the streets. Mary invited them to come to the school, ensuring that they understood that they did not have to pay for the privilege. Sadly, they informed her that this was impossible because they had no suitable clothes. True to her motto to do all the good she could, Mary took immediate action. She put an advertisement in the local catholic paper asking for second hand clothes to be delivered to the Hall so that she and the older students could cut them down and then make them up to fit the street children.

Her plan worked. Gradually more children arrived at the school and within six months the enrolment had reached 200. These youngsters were delighted with their fine new second-hand clothes and with the fact that they were now learning to read and write and



discovering that there was a God who loved them. The children were also learning to feel proud of being catholic, especially in a city like Adelaide where catholics were a poor minority and often suffered discrimination at the hands of their Protestant employers.

To achieve this end, Mary and the sisters organised a spectacular event involving the children from all the local catholic schools. It was a procession in honour of Mary, the Mother of God, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 1867. Taking part were more than 100 boys in black jackets, white trousers and blue sashes, 300 girls in white with white veils, the Sisters of St Joseph and numerous members of the public. All marched from St Patrick's Church on West Terrace, Adelaide, along a main thoroughfare to the cathedral in the centre of town. There, Father Woods conducted Vespers and Benediction before dismissing the children. According to the *Southern Cross and Catholic Herald*:

The beautiful ceremonial and the tasteful, peaceful way in which it was carried out, left the most favourable impressions on all classes, while it (did not give) rise to a single disrespectful expression or murmur of disrespect.¹⁰

Saints' feast days featured in the school calendar and Mary saw to it that they were celebrated appropriately. In particular, on 2 October, the feast of the Guardian Angels, she and the sisters organised special treats for the children, including picnics in nearby parks. Often, children from neighbouring schools came together for a day of fun together. At times, Mary's good friend, Mrs Joanna Barr Smith

and her associates, provided the food for the day. As a rule, it concluded with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the local church and, as many a young child has concluded an account of a happy outing: *They all went home tired but happy.*

Throughout her life, Mary continued to demonstrate her great love for children, especially those with a disability. Whenever she visited a school she carried a bag of lollies in her deep pocket and distributed them before she left, making sure that no one missed out. She fought hard to ensure that the sisters remained true to their original mandate to teach the children of the poor. She was very upset when she discovered that some sisters were yielding to pressure on this point and teaching higher grades. Where people insisted, she withdrew the sisters as soon as the priest could replace them with members of an Order founded for that purpose.

With time, the number of sisters increased and, as they did, so did the number of schools with the Josephite ethos. These Josephite women were remarkable indeed and Mary could never have achieved what she did without them. They willingly followed Mary's example as women who loved teaching because they loved children and Mary constantly reminded them of their responsibilities towards the poorest and most vulnerable among them. Mary became the first Sister of St Joseph because she was a teacher. She remained a sister because of the children and to this day, is remembered as the foundress of an Order devoted to teaching.

Marie Foale rsj

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1. Geoghegan, Patrick OSF, Pastoral Letter of Patrick Bonaventure, by Divine Grace and Favour of the Apostolic See, Bishop of Adelaide, to the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese, on the Education of Catholic Children, Adelaide, September 1960, p. 16.
 2. O'Neill, George SJ, *Life of Mother Mary of the Cross (McKillop)*, Pellegrini, Sydney, 1931, p. 14.
 3. Mary to Woods from Queensland, 26 May 1870.
 4. Mary MacKillop, "Necessity for the Institute", August 1873, Resource Material from the Archives of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Issue 3, January 1980, p.59
 5. Haines, Gregory et al, eds. *The Eye of Faith: The Pastoral Letters of John Bede Polding*, Lowden Publishing Co. 1978, pp. 261 - 268.
 6. Mary to Bishop Sheil, from the steamer, Kangaroo, 10 September 1871.
 7. J.E.T. Woods, "Rules of the Institute of St Joseph," Resource Material from the Archives of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, Issue 3, January 1980, p.1
 8. *Ibid.* pp. 23 – 24.
 9. The tenth sister to join the community entered on this day and two were 65 km away at Yankalilla. Therefore there would have been no more than seven sisters in the procession. According to the account, they intoned the litany of the Blessed Virgin and the other participants sang the responses.
 10. *Southern Cross & Catholic Herald*, Adelaide, 20 December 1867.

