

Mary MacKillop

The Australian People's Saint

Who was Mary MacKillop?

Any answer to this question has to take into account three aspects of Mary's personhood so integrated that we can only speak of them in the same breath – Mary MacKillop was an Australian Catholic woman.

The daughter of migrant Scottish parents, Mary was born in Melbourne on January 15th, 1842. As the oldest of eight children, she quickly took on a role of responsibility for her family's emotional and, eventually, financial welfare. She described her home as 'a most unhappy one' due, no doubt to the strained relationship between her parents arising from the family's perennial shortage of finance and the constant dependence on relatives for shelter and support.

Nevertheless, Mary loved both her parents dearly and absorbed from them values which were to sustain her throughout her life. These values were expressed most noticeable in the area of religion. The God Mary knew was not a fearful, 'strict' God but one whose passionate love and provident care for every creature evokes confidence and trust. The Catholic Church is not a mere institution but an instrument through which the love of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and experienced. It was this faith that helped Mary look beyond the shortcomings and prejudices of particular Church clergy and gave her the heart to devote her whole life to its welfare.

At a time when women had little power either in Church or in Society as a whole, Mary's leadership made a huge contribution to the changing of the status of the poor in this country. In collaboration with Father Woods, parish priest of Penola, South Australia, she founded in 1866 an institute of women whose presence in the outback and with the disadvantaged created oases of faith in an otherwise barren environment.

Mary was a woman of courage, relatively small in stature but with a heart that transcended the capriciousness of artificial boundaries. Convinced as she was that the needs of the Gospel required her Sisters to go to the area of greatest need, she was soon faced with the parochial anxieties of bishops and priests who could not abide that someone outside of their diocese – and a woman at that – should have the power to appoint or withdraw sisters from their service. Attempts were made to put Mary 'in her place' – when threats and force did not work, she was accused of sentimentalism, immaturity, and dishonesty, advantage even being taken of her condition of dysmenorrhoea to label her resorting to medication as 'drunkenness'.

Geographical boundaries meant little to her. Mary described herself first of all as an 'Australian' when Australia was merely a number of British colonies. Qualities identified in Mary's character often typify the Australian personality. Her determined efforts to overcome European class consciousness among her Sisters and those they served mirror the 'equality'



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claimed in the foundations of our nation. Mary's care was for those disregarded by the majority in her time – the country kids; street people, prostitutes; the homeless aged. Every person, no matter what their background or what type of life they had led, deserved to be 'given a go'.

Mary MacKillop, 'Australian', 'Catholic', 'woman' died in North Sydney on August 8th, 1909, and was acclaimed by the people of her time as one who had embodied great vision, heroic character and outstanding holiness. We are proud to share this same opinion of her today.

Her Life

Mary MacKillop was born in Fitzroy, Melbourne on 15 January 1842 and died in Sydney on 8 August 1901. The years between these two dates tell a remarkable story of Mary's strength, of her compassion and above all else her absolute trust in God.

Mary was the eldest of eight children born to Scottish migrants. About her early life she writes... *'My life as a child was one of sorrow, my home when I had it a most unhappy one.'* Much of this sorrow was due to insecurity in the family income. For much of their lives the family was dependent on relatives for shelter and support. At age sixteen, Mary became the main provider for the family. She worked as a governess, then as shop assistant in the stationers 'Sands and Kenny' and finally as a school teacher in Portland, Victoria. In 1866 she accepted Father Julian Tenison Woods' invitation to teach in the school at Penola. This was to be a school with a difference. Every child was welcome, indeed parents, not just the financially able were encouraged and helped to enroll their children. To make this vision of education for all possible and continue it required dedicated teachers prepared to live poorly. Young women joined with Mary and formed the Sisters of St Joseph.

These women, many of whom were 'colonials' organised themselves in an egalitarian, independent way and lived among the people in shanties, tents and low rent accommodation. The more conservative Catholic looked askance, some of the Bishops found the idea, not only foreign, but impossible, but the poor and the free thinker welcomed the Australian freshness of the vision and its practical interpretation. So startling was this concept that one Bishop publicly banished Mary from the Catholic Church.

It was at this point that friends from a cross section of society and different religious persuasions rallied to her aid. Notable among these were the Jesuit Fathers, Johanna Barr Smith a prominent Anglican and Emanuel Solomon a Jewish Member of Parliament in Adelaide. With their support the work was saved. This experience taught Mary that official approval of the group was necessary. She begged her passage to Rome, and travelled dressed as a widow. She requested the Pope to approve the constitution that guided the way of life of the Sisters. The rules were re-drafted. Mary accepted the changes believing that a higher wisdom was guiding the group. On her return trip she was accompanied by several young women, some already members of other orders of nuns, others interested in joining Mary and her Sisters.



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The Sisters continued to teach in small farming communities, railway camps and the goldfields. They also opened up shelters for the elderly, the homeless and the neglected. In Mary's lifetime this innovative uniquely Australian venture had spread across Australia and New Zealand.

In 1902 while encouraging the Sisters in New Zealand she suffered a crippling stroke. Years of hardship, travel and anxiety had taken their toll of this courageous, forgiving, faith-filled woman. Her last resting place is in the Mary MacKillop Memorial Chapel at North Sydney.

A Very Australian Saint

The Beatification of Mary MacKillop – Australia's first saint – is a cause for celebration for all Australians.

It is a significant milestone in Australia's history because it will recognise and acclaim what being Australian is all about ... it will celebrate achievement regardless of class or status, courage despite the odds, tenacity, and the strength of an individual's conviction to stand up to officialdom when officialdom goes wrong.

So who was, and is, Mary MacKillop?

- She was female
- She was an Australian
- She was poor
- She was intelligent
- She was a teacher
- She was a risk-taker
- She was resourceful
- She was optimistic
- She was kind



But she is much more than all of those things put together. Her life's story is that of a saint. Mary MacKillop's secret was that she saw things differently. Nothing unpleasant in others blinded her to seeing God in them, to seeing their basic dignity as human beings.

When Mary MacKillop founded the institute of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in 1867 – the first order of nuns established by an Australian – her vision was radically different from the traditions of the established orders of nuns from England, Ireland and Europe.

The members of the orders drawn from those traditions were usually from the more privileged classes, who brought dowries with them, and who lived in established convents. Those nuns, of course, did extraordinary work, but on the whole it could not be said they were of the people.



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A Great Australian

Mary MacKillop is significant because she:

- Is the only acknowledged saint in the history of the Catholic Church in Australia;
- Lived and worked for, and in, Australia;
- Died in Australia.

A woman of great energy, vitality and action:

- She stepped outside the expectations religious and secular culture had for women of the Victorian era;
- She established an educational system which spread across Australia and New Zealand;
- She developed institutions which gave people in crisis a chance of survival and a quality of life;
- She tackled major questions of social justice in Australia, cutting across class boundaries and believing in the dignity of all peoples.

A reflective woman:

- A woman of prayer and compassion;
- A woman who forgave her enemies and worked for reconciliation with all of them;
- An Australian who values the inner life as well as the active life;
- A woman who challenges us now to do as she did.

A woman who has inspired others today:

- To work in third world countries;
- To look for ways to stand with the dispossessed and alienated;
- To realise there are other dimensions in life beside the material;
- To rejuvenate their 'frayed spirituality'.

An Australian whose spirit can lead us into the future because:

- She was a realist who faced her inadequacies but believed in her dream;
- She calls us all to tenacity and shows us that hope can triumph over despair;
- She responded to all in need and, above all;
- She was a human being in love with God and God's people.



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