

Mary MacKillop & Pain

The Woman Bent Double

Sr Marie Therese Foale rsj

A reflection on the gospel passage about the Woman Bent Over – Luke 13:10-17, as given in Adelaide (1.3.97) by Sr Marie Foale.

Mary MacKillop was a woman bent double with spiritual, physical and emotional pain. Suffering, the Cross, was always a part of her life. Yet, like the woman in the story, she let the pain flow through her. It did not possess her. She did not become embittered but remained faithful to her God even when all she could see was darkness. Then, at the word of Jesus, she was able to stand straight again, look into his eyes, and move forward with renewed courage. For her, the healing happened not once, but many times.

Mary once wrote that her life as a child was one of sorrows and her family home, when she had one, was most unhappy. However, she could add: 'Yet for all that, my good God watched over me and guarded me'. [1]

As a young woman in Portland, she met her first real test of faith – when she was blamed unjustly for having been involved in the uncovering of head-teacher Cusack's dishonesty. This storm raged for the last four months she spent in Portland. Rather than let it crush her, however, she let the suffering pass through her and, at its end, blessed God for the care he took of her mind and heart during those months. She stated that the more these troubles pressed on her, the more the peace and love and gratitude of her good God filled her heart. [2]

Mary's was a strong, simple faith, and her prayer was that, no matter what the cost, she would do God's Will. This was not always easy. Once in the very early days of the Institute, it seemed that God was telling her that one day she would lose the guidance of Father Woods. At this point, as she put it:

'I dared to tell our dear Lord that I would not do what he asked, or that it was too hard, but in the end, my prayer was that I would not cease to implore his merciful grace to do entirely His Will only, no matter what the cost, when he should require it of me, but I felt that I could not from my heart then say that I did not feel it hard.' [3]

When the storm burst in Adelaide and the Bishop was claiming his right to change the rule he had approved, Mary, so simple and single-minded in her purpose, dared to write:

'From the time it was approved, I looked upon it as sacred, and can you blame me my Lord if I do still. I know that you can withdraw your approbation from it, and if our good God so wills it, I am resigned. But Oh! Pardon me my Lord if I say that I cannot in conscience see the rule altered and remain still a Sister. I want to please you, but above all to please God, and do His holy Will.

If then in any way it may please Him that you should alter the rule, then my Lord, I feel that I must take the alternative that you offered and leave the Institute until it may please God to give in some other place what my soul desires.' [4]

No bent or broken woman here, but one with the courage of her convictions, who could stand straight before God and before the Bishop.



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She paid for her courage with excommunication, but again, she felt that God was with her. Of this time she could write that:

'Nothing that happened to me or the sisters was hard enough to disturb my peace, and as at Portland, I felt the greatest love for those who were persecuting us.' [5]

Standing straight once more, Mary travelled to Rome and returned to find even greater troubles. For the thirty odd years remaining to her, pain and suffering surrounded her. It seems that, like Job, her faith and trust were being tested to the ultimate degree.

To her, the Rule was sacred and to be observed at all costs. Hence, she had to stand up to bishops whose ideas about the Institute differed from hers.

Even harder than the pressures and difficulties coming from the outside, however, was the realisation that not all her Sisters had the same understanding of the Rule as she did and the same simple faith and trust in God. The disloyalty of some cut her to the quick, as did the loss of the friendship of Father Woods and the change in attitude of Bishop Reynolds. The 1880s were a time of unmitigated pain and darkness, not only for herself but for the Sisters in Adelaide as well.

At the time of Mary's excommunication, the local Catholic community knew what had happened and supported her and the Sisters. This time, no-one outside the Congregation knew that they were under pressure. All these brave women, bent and crushed with sorrow, remained faithful and true. They stood straight before God.

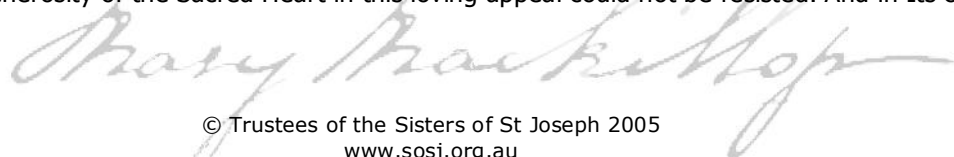
For Mary there were constant weariness and ill-health, false accusations, her deposition from her position in Adelaide and then from her position as Superior General of the Congregation. Small wonder that she wrote that she felt she should run away somewhere and hide. Then in the middle of everything else, her mother died tragically.

There seemed no end to it. But for Mary, now older and wiser, the simple faith of her early years tested and tried to a point where she must have wondered where God was in all this darkness, it was a time of amazing growth.

She developed such a deep, serene trust in God's Will and God's Providence, that, as she sat in her wheelchair, dependent for everything on others, she could remind my own dear Sisters . . . to refuse nothing to God's love and to be humble and in earnest, so that they would refuse no sacrifice God might ask of them. [6]

During her final years, much of which she spent in a wheelchair, she had plenty of time to reflect on God's wonderful ways in her life, to stand straight and look into the eyes of Jesus. There was no self-pity here, just an amazing strength and serenity that enabled her to let go of so much that she had held dear - her travelling to visit the sisters, her letter writing, her need to be in control. Everything was gone. Yet at this time we get some of her most profound writings. When translated into modern English, it is a powerful statement of her spirituality.

'With this burning appeal of the Sacred Heart came such a rushing of longing desire on my part to be Its lover and Its own true child, that in a glance, the falseness of the world appeared to me; the beauty, the pity, and the generosity of the Sacred Heart in this loving appeal could not be resisted. And in Its cause,



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since It deigned to raise me to It, I have never known aught but true peace and contentment of heart. Its love makes suffering sweet, Its love makes the world a desert. When storms rage, when persecutions or dangers threaten, I quietly creep into Its deep abyss; and securely sheltered there, my soul is in peace, though my body is tossed upon the stormy waves of a cold and selfish world.' [7]

Then comes her final exhortation to her Sisters:-

Whatever troubles may be before you, accept them cheerfully, remembering whom you are trying to follow. Do not be afraid. Love one another, bear with one another, and let charity guide you in all your life. [8]

And then that very last letter message:

That God may ever bless you and make you more and more His own is the fervent wish of Your fond Mother in JMJ.

Mary of the Cross [9]

[1] Mary MacKillop to Monsignor Kirby, Rome, Ascension Thursday, 1873

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Mary MacKillop to Bishop Sheil of Adelaide, 10 September 1871

[5] MacKillop to Kirby, 1873

[6] Mary MacKillop to the Sisters, 18 September 1906

[7] Ibid. 21 May 1907

[8] Ibid. 12 January 1909

[9] Ibid. 19 March 1909



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