

## **Mary MacKillop – An Australian Like Us**

### **Introducing us to the spirit of Mary MacKillop**

#### **1.**

Born in Melbourne on January 15, 1842, of Scottish migrant parents, Mary was the eldest of eight children. Her mother, Flora (McDonald), a strong and courageous woman, had amazing trust in God's Providence. Her 'schoolmaster' father, Alexander, was unsuccessful in business. In 1873, Mary would write: 'My life as a child was one of sorrow, my home when I had it a most unhappy one... When I was a little more than sixteen years of age, the principal care of a large family fell upon me, and ... I felt its burden yearly more and more.'

#### **2.**

Mary's father, Alexander, was often caught up in speculative ventures but his lack of business sense, combined with passionate idealism (including forays into politics), led to temporary periods of slight prosperity but ended in insolvency. Unable to support his wife and children, a dispirited Alexander moved away. With compassionate love for him, Mary wrote to her mother in 1867: 'I do feel for his lonely state.' In 1868, with his loving wife Flora at his side, Alexander died in Hamilton, Victoria.

#### **3.**

The deep love between Mary and her mother, Flora, shines through their letters. Mary always began with 'My dearest Mamma' and on August 14, 1866, reminded her mother of the importance of her example: "You so often sought, not by precept only but by example also, to impress on the minds of your children ... that 'God will comfort you and that God will provide'."

#### **4.**

To bring some money into the poverty-stricken home, Mary MacKillop sought employment in Melbourne as a nursery governess then as a Stationer's clerk. In 1860, at age 18, she went to Penola (South Australia) as governess. Her writing style, teaching aptitude and religious knowledge indicate that she was well-educated: 'From (my father) I learnt so much. He had studied for seven years in Rome alone, and under the Jesuit fathers.' (1873)

#### **5.**

In 1862, Mary MacKillop returned to Melbourne but soon moved to Portland where she educated a family's young children, then taught in the Denominational School. Being church sacristan, she had 'charge of the Altar and the Lamp' and was 'able to go into the chapel at any time, where the Blessed Sacrament always is.' Mary regarded this as 'a precious favour indeed' even when she was mistakenly locked in for a night. (1864).

## **6.**

While in Penola, Mary MacKillop met the Pastor of that vast district, Julian Edmund Tenison Woods (English priest, scholar and scientist). Vitally interested in education, he opened a school but four years later in one of his letters to Mary in Portland, he wrote it 'cannot be properly conducted until you come up yourself.' In 1866, Mary and Lexie set off by coach for Penola to join their other sister, Annie.

## **7.**

Mary, Annie and Lexie MacKillop used both the Penola church and part of their rented cottage for classes. Their brother John was able to convert a rented stable into a school house, so on 19 March 1866 St Joseph's School was opened. Locals began talking on that day when Mary appeared in a black dress, but were delighted that the new school had 33 pupils and was doing very well.

## **8.**

Mary MacKillop wrote to her mother, "When I was (Lexie's) age (15) I began first to long for a Religious Life." (1866). It is presumed that she would have intended entry into the Melbourne Sisters of Mercy. In Penola, however, she saw the need for a new kind of Religious Congregation: one whose members could live in isolated places, be free to move where needed, and go where other nuns could not.

## **9.**

Fr Woods encouraged Mary MacKillop's Religious vocation and, when two ladies of similar mind joined her, he submitted to the Bishop his plan for their Rule. As Director General of the diocesan schools, he invited Mary and her Sisters to Adelaide in June 1867. As they were prepared to go to far-away places where they were deprived of Mass on weekdays and often Sundays as well, the Sisters became 'Church' for the locals.

## **10.**

On 15 August 1867, Sister Mary MacKillop took both her first Vows as a Religious and the title 'of the Cross': a call to lifetime courage. After the most extraordinary cross, her 1871 excommunication from the Catholic Church, Mary was able to say 'I felt nearer to God than I had ever felt before' and afterwards to her mother she wrote 'My path, dearest Mamma, will yet be that of the Cross.' (1872)

#### **11.**

After only three years in Adelaide, Mary MacKillop's Sisters were providing other services as well as educational. Care was available in The Providence (for neglected children, girls in danger and the aged poor), The Solitude (for the aged and the incurably ill), a Refuge (for women off the streets or newly from jail), and an Orphanage. As numbers increased, the Sisters needed to beg for the food required.

#### **12.**

Mary established a system of elementary Catholic education that would prepare for suitable employment the children of ordinary working class people. She was, however, opposed to lessons in instrumental music for which parents would need to pay money they could ill afford. They could also give poor children ideas so totally opposed to their positions in life that they would grow up 'weary of their poor homes, and seek amusements dangerous to their salvation.' (1873).

#### **13.**

Mary was aware that colonial Catholics knew only large enclosed religious communities, so thought that her Sisters were 'not real nuns'. Explaining to Monsignor Kirby in Rome she wrote in 1873: 'what would seem out of place in Europe is still very much the reverse in most parts of Australia. It is an Australian who writes this: one brought up in the midst of the very evils she tries to describe.'

#### **14.**

Hearing of the Josephites' good work, Bishop James Quinn invited them to Brisbane. On 8 December 1869 Mary and companions set out from Adelaide, 'begging' for fares from one colony to the next. The next year Mary wrote to her mother, 'the Sydney young ladies were not half as much ashamed of the poor Sisters as some of the Victorian ones were. But in Sydney they were more used to poor Religious.'

#### **15.**

On their way to Brisbane, Mary and companions received hospitality from Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Melbourne and Good Samaritan in Sydney, and kindness from the Marist Fathers at the French Mission in Sydney. 'All these holy Religious (while promising lasting friendship) told me to prepare for great and heavy crosses,' Mary wrote to her mother. (6 June 1870). This was appropriate warning of the 'Brisbane Nightmare.' (Paul Gardiner SJ in *An Extraordinary Australian, Mary MacKillop*).

## **16.**

At the end of 1869 the Josephites arrived in the 'free' Government-funded education scene of Brisbane. Mary refused to allow Josephite schools to be controlled by the Government Board, stating that the Sisters were not self-willed and obstinate, but that 'St Joseph's schools are strictly and purely Catholic ones, intended only for the humble poor.' (August 1870). To add to her problems, the Bishop believed that the Sisters should function under his authority.

## **17.**

Mary returned from Brisbane to escalating problems in Adelaide where misunderstandings led to suggestions about abandonment of the basic structure of central government. On 22 September 1871, Mary was excommunicated for 'disobedience and rebellion'. Public rumours led Mary to write to her sorrowing mother, 'Will you, though I give no explanations, wait until those whose duty it is to see into these matters are enabled to do so, and then justice will be done.' (22 November 1871).

## **18.**

When Mary's excommunication was lifted in February 1872, some Sisters of her disbanded community returned, schools gradually reopened, and in July three set out from Adelaide for Bathurst. In spite of austere living conditions in the 'most awfully cold' place, they established their school at The Vale (basing their teaching on Mary's methods and structured system with emphasis on the religious dimension of life), and visited the people of the village.

## **19.**

Appreciated by Bathurst's local clergy and people, the Sisters felt their distance from the Adelaide Mother House. Bishop Quinn welcomed them and their education successes, but expected direct authority over them. In the light of this and the Brisbane experience,

therefore, in 1873 Mary went to Rome to seek Papal endorsement of centralised governance. While waiting, she left Rome's heat to recover her health. 'Just imagine,' she wrote to her Scottish mother, 'my going to a wild glen.'

## **20.**

Many volumes have been written to describe and analyse the events concerning the Josephites in Adelaide, Bathurst and Brisbane. Mary knew that each Bishop desired the best for his diocese, but she insisted on central governance (according to the Rule rewritten in Rome). She wanted her Sisters to be free to move across dioceses to 'do all the good they can, and never see an evil without trying how they might remedy it.'

## **21.**

In 1876, a Diocesan Congregation came into being in Bathurst. Having no faith in Mary MacKillop, 'a woman who had never spent one hour in religious training,' the Bishop appointed as Sister Guardian one who had been with Mary since 1868. From Brisbane, Mary ('young, sentimental, female, obstinate, colonial – and not Irish') and her authority were dismissed. From 1880 all Sisters of St Joseph left Queensland (returning under central government in 1900).

## **22.**

Sisters returning from Brisbane were welcomed in Armidale and Sydney. Meanwhile, both the diocese and Josephites of Adelaide were in financial straits. In 1883 Bishop Reynolds, previously a supportive friend, declared Mary an unfit Superior and told her to leave for Sydney at once (saying that it was for health reasons) and stay away. The Sisters were disturbed at Mary's long absence but remained loyal to central governance despite the Bishop's attempts to assume control of the Institute.

## **23.**

Mary continued to write to her Sisters in Adelaide from her new home in North Sydney, 'The place is beautifully retired; though near one of the chief streets, it is as quiet as if miles away from other people. We have no noise, bustle or excitement, have a nice little garden and paddock with high fences.' (9 May, 1883) This became the Mother House and the only Novitiate of the Sisters of St Joseph.

**24.**

On 30 May 1886, Flora MacKillop was on her way to Sydney on board the *Lyee-Moon* when it was wrecked on the south coast of NSW. Distraught as she was at her mother's tragic death, Mary accepted the Will of God: 'God help us all. The hand of God is heavy upon us, but His Holy Will must be done. Oh, Annie, I had so yearned to see her again.' (To her sister, 1 June)

**25.**

A compassionate Mother to her Sisters, Mary made good friends from all walks of life. Especially dear to her were Joanna Barr-Smith and Emanuel Solomon in Adelaide, and Monsignor Kirby and Fr Anderledy in Rome. Nearest to her heart, however, were the poor and disadvantaged: 'These are the children I love'. Dogged by sadness and ill health throughout her life, she was sustained by her trust in a Provident God.

**26.**

Julian Tenison Woods was Mary's friend and Spiritual Director from Penola times, but she was prepared to challenge him who, influenced by pietistic mysticism, believed it was acceptable for a Sister to spend more time in prayer even at the expense of her work. Mary prayed earnestly and long, but believed that prayer was a support for work. As a practical mystic she wrote, 'There where you are, you will find God.' (1871).

**27.**

Increasingly, Sisters were called to developing areas in South Australia, to Sydney foundations, and to new openings in New Zealand, Western Australia and Melbourne. Knowing their mostly unspeakable hardships, Mary lovingly encouraged her Sisters: 'Have courage, no matter what your crosses are.' (1890). Illness notwithstanding, Mary was an inveterate traveller. Even a cursory glance at her letters shows the extent and frequency of visits to her Sisters throughout Australia and New Zealand.

**28.**

In her many letters, Mary shared her intimate relationship with God and, as she detailed her visits to them in their isolation and deprivation, inspired her Sisters to carry on: 'We can all work quietly doing our best for God' (1883). As her health declined Mary visited when she could, but continued writing her words of support and encouragement – first with her left hand, then by typewriter and by dictation to one of the Sisters.

**29.**

By 1909 it was obvious that Mary was dying. In January from her sick room, she sent a message 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.’ On 8 August, she passed away so peacefully that the Sisters keeping watch were hardly aware of it.

**30. Sunday 17 October 2010**

In the ceremony of Canonisation today in Rome, the life and spirituality of our Australian “Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop” have been officially acclaimed by the Universal Church. Her experiences and her many letters have inspired many to reflect on Mary in published and electronic format, and in musical and dramatic works. As we remember her final words, “Go on!” we are proud that her spirit is truly alive today, and her work continues.