

'One of US is a Saint!'

"Do all you can with the means at your disposal, and calmly leave the rest to God."

Mary MacKillop, 1891—Aged 49



The veneration of people or places seen to have a special relationship with the holy is a phenomenon common to all civilisations. By the time of her death on August 8th, 1909, Mary MacKillop was venerated by the general public as a woman of great vision, of heroic character and outstanding holiness. Cardinal Moran visited her at Mount Street, North Sydney in her last illness and declared: *'Her death will bring many blessings ... on the whole Australian Church.'* On leaving the convent he added: *'I consider I have this day assisted at the deathbed of a saint'*. Notice of her death was featured not only by the Catholic press but also the secular press. For her Requiem Mass, the Church was filled to overflowing, and people crowded both sides of the street as the funeral procession wound its way to the cemetery. One of her early companions testified: *'the reason the Sisters looked on her with veneration and the outside world had such an interest in her was her personal virtue rather than her achievements.'*

For our society, Mary models those religious or spiritual values that are enshrined in the myth of what it means to be Australian. What, then, are the 'Australian' spiritual values that Mary enshrines?

When Mary refused to divide her Sisters into 'lay' and 'choir' Sisters, she demonstrated the Christian virtue of belief in the dignity of all humans as made in the image of God. This action is in sympathy with the Australian ideal of giving everyone a 'fair go', no matter what their social status. In nineteenth century Australia, the key to claiming one's dignity was through education. In making education available to the poor, Mary embodied the values of a society which would like to describe itself as 'egalitarian'. Mary's resistance to segregating paying students from non-paying students, and her reluctance to have her Sisters teach music lest they appear 'above' the poor, belong to the same tradition.

For many, institutional religion epitomises the type of overbearing attitude against which the legendary Australian struggles. That Mary found herself the victim of unjust ecclesiastical structures and that, on not a few occasions, she politely but firmly maintained her position before Church dignitaries, makes her a credible hero even to non-believers. Further, as a woman, her access to decision-making power within Church circles was severely limited. Within recent years, more and more women comment on the inspiration they receive from reflection on Mary's ability to live with ambiguity: they can identify with her struggle to find the meaning of faith in a Church whose structures were so unattuned to the needs she observed—and whose power systems placed her in such a position of vulnerability.

The story of the ANZACS is one which has become legendary in Australia. In the defeat at Gallipoli, it seems, Australia identified its soul. Not for us the loud boasting of the 'self-made' character we praise, instead, the one who endures in adversity—the 'quiet achiever'. The 'cross' that featured so much in Mary's life surely puts her into this category. In so many instances, her adversaries came out the 'winners'. Mary's refusal to further the evil by self righteous defence was often based on an acknowledgment of the legitimate role of authority figures especially in the Church, even though she could not agree with their actions. She had a wonderful ability to suspend judgement of the motives of these people. Moreover, on more than one occasion, we learn that Mary quietly replaced the evil with good ... *'When the Secretary of the Commission that condemned her was himself suspended for intemperance, he went to her for help and she sold her own watch to provide him with a suit of clothes.'* (Cardinal Gilroy)

In presenting her case to Rome for approval of her Sisterhood in 1873, Mary had argued her case on the premise that *'It is an Australian who writes this ...'* Only one brought up in the Australian setting can fully appreciate the peculiarities of this land and the needs of its people. In her endless travels in remote parts of Australia, Mary and her Sisters were deeply involved in the Australian encounter with the land. For many, Mary is a *'Drover's Wife'* character, experiencing the hopes and dreams of the pioneers as they carved out farms and mines in what was, to them, a 'wilderness'. The Australian themes of blighted dreams and survival under hardship were part of the world into which Mary brought her practical brand of faith, a faith that stood her in good stead in her own hardships. Mary's background of having grown up in this country gives her a particular ability to understand the situation of its people.

Mary was a 'doer'. Her practicality in identifying the crucial issues facing the Church and doing something about them appeals to the Australian imagination. Max Harris, well-known writer and proclaimed agnostic, named it as 'goodness' ... *'Goodness is not a state of mind alone. It is a source for the most productive energies.'* It comes as no surprise to those who admire Mary that her first response was always to 'roll up her sleeves' and do something about the situation. When one of her Sisters was badly burnt at Port Augusta, she immediately caught the coach to Quorn, a town twenty miles from her destination, and was prepared to ride a horse for the remainder of the journey. Her practical kindness is legendary. Before leaving her Sisters in the isolated town of Arrowtown, New Zealand, Mary set up a fowl house and bought chickens to ensure ongoing nourishment for the community. Such 'ordinariness' is constantly alluded to by those writing letters of intercession to be placed at the site of Mary's tomb. People sense that this woman understands their homely situation. Somehow, Mary has named for these people the truth that, in the stuff of everyday life, God is both involved and encountered.

In 1992, the Sisters of St Joseph held a consultation with a large group of people from various walks of life to discuss the implications of the deterioration of the buildings at Mount Street, North Sydney - and especially of the area around Mary MacKillop's tomb. One option was to sell the land and relocate the tomb elsewhere. It was a group of Aboriginal people who opposed this proposal and impressed on us the importance of the 'sacred site'. Nothing can alter the fact that it was here that Mary MacKillop lived and died. It is here that the vitality of her spirit lives on. While all may draw inspiration from her memory and may claim her intercession, Australia needs to see and touch those things that were seen and touched by Mary MacKillop so that, at last, we can say, *'One of us is a saint!'*

What situation in my life is calling for me to 'roll up my sleeves' and do something about it?

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