

New Book Focuses on the Virtues of Mother Mary MacKillop

A book has just been published on the Christian virtues of Mother Mary MacKillop, now Saint Mary of the Cross. It is not a biography, but rather a character portrait, tracing the outline of the virtues exemplified all through her life. Its focus is on Mary MacKillop the person and disciple of Jesus Christ, rather than on the many works she undertook.

It was written by the late Fr Paul Gardiner S.J., the Postulator of the cause for her canonisation, and was presented to the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints in 1989, along with the 2-volume work which contains her official biography, since published as *The Life of Saint Mary of the Cross, Mary MacKillop 1842-1909* (Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2015).

The present text, printed privately in 1989 and now accessible to all, reveals that Mother Mary practised the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, in a manner that was not simply noteworthy but indeed heroic.

Tested by pressures of life that would have shown up anything counterfeit or superficial, Mother Mary's living of the virtues was rock solid throughout the many storms that beset her personally and the institution and works that she founded.

Shortly before the Process of Canonisation opened, some senior Sisters were asked by the Mother General to write what they remembered of Mother Mary. Many of them wrote that they remembered the person more than her works. They couldn't remember everything she did, but they remembered her. As Sister Mechtilde wrote: *"I think the reason the Sisters looked on her with veneration was because of her virtues more than her works. I think that the respect that was shown to her by the outside world was because of her personal virtue."*

After labouring through a page of writing, one old Sister, Sr Genevieve Wantstill, felt it was time to sum up: *I am sorry dear Mother that I cannot relate other incidents completely except that our dear Mother was good humble charitable and kind to all.*

Charity is, of course, the first of all the virtues, and what St Paul wrote about charity could be described as a character portrait of Mary MacKillop:

Love is always patient and kind; love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. (1 Cor 13)

Mary had plenty of opportunities to display characteristics opposed to this ideal of the Apostle. She certainly had more than enough grievances to brood over, and what she endured would have provoked a stone to anger. But she made allowances for the grossest behaviour, excused the inexcusable, and repaid unkind treatment with sweetness that astonished those who witnessed it. At the Process, Father Francis Clune C.P. pointed to the explanation of it all:

Her union with God was continuous. Her life was one prayer. Prayer, I am sure, helped her a lot. She would have no ill will to anyone. ...

Continuous union with God. My first impression was that she was wrapped up in God. As far as a human being could, she was in union with God.

This union with God was the secret of the inner peace which Mother Mary maintained even at the worst of times, writes Fr Gardiner. Together with her kindness, this peace was the characteristic most noted by those who knew her well. Sister Mechtilde had this to say in her *History of the Institute*:

One of the most remarkable features in the character of Mother Mary was her wonderful control under all circumstances. Under the trials of government, poverty, debt and persecution, she was always uncomplaining, even-tempered and approachable. It was much easier to admire those virtues than to explain them with justice.

The Virtues of St Mary of the Cross, Mary Mackillop 1842-1909, has been published on the eve of Lent 2019. It is a most timely book for this season when we take time to reflect on our own living of the virtues. Mary MacKillop's life provides a benchmark that few of us can reach. Reading this book, however, doesn't leave us discouraged but inspires us, whose lives are often much simpler than Mary's, to strive for growth in our own living of the virtues.

Michael Goonan SSP

***The Virtues of St Mary of the Cross, Mary Mackillop 1842-1909*, by Fr Paul Gardiner S.J. Prepared for publication by Fr Peter Joseph. Published by St Pauls Publications, Strathfield NSW. ISBN 9781925494358 160 pages \$14.95.**