



Mary MacKillop's Birthday (15 January)

Mary Cresp rsj

Beginnings are important. They often act as a prologue, as it were, to the meaning of what follows. Over past weeks we have pondered the meaning of Jesus' life as described in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. Right from the beginning, we are told, the birth of Jesus would demonstrate the Good News he would be for the poor; his coming would bring light to the nations and show the world the true path to peace. In the midst of suffering and hardship, the message that God is present with us enables us to find hope, no matter how dense the darkness.

So what of the birth of Mary MacKillop? This child who would prove to be pioneer in so many aspects of Australian religious and social history was born of migrant parents in the pioneer settlement of Melbourne on 15 January 1842. Her father, Alexander, had arrived from Scotland barely four years before, and had married another migrant, Flora McDonald, on 14 July 1840. At first, the family's prospects looked good, but through a series of unfortunate happenings, Alexander soon lost his favourable social and financial standing, 'due to a combination of his character, his lack of business sense and the fact that there were a lot of smarter people around.'¹ Nevertheless, Alexander was an intelligent, educated man, passionate for the rights of all, no matter what their background. It can be attributed to his foundational influence that his daughter, Mary, would later be instrumental in assuring in Australia and beyond the right of every child to an education. Her belief in a classless society would bring her grief, as it did her father, yet since it was based on an understanding of the God-given dignity of every human being, it was integrated into her whole way of life, her growth into sanctity.



Earliest known portrait of Mary MacKillop

Mary's mother, Flora, was likewise a precursor of what her daughter would be. While she was pregnant, a priest had lent her a relic of the Holy Cross to wear until her child was born. 'My name in religion is Mary of the Cross', Mary would write to her in 1867. 'No name could be dearer to me, so I must endeavour, not to deserve it – for I cannot – but at least I must try not to disgrace it.'² Having borne the cross in different sufferings throughout her life, Mary would, in our time, be acclaimed as 'St Mary of the Cross MacKillop'.

It was to Flora, too, that Mary looked for an example of trust in God's Providence and the search for God's will. These would become the prominent aspects of Mary's spirituality. 'Dearest Mama', she wrote, 'you ever taught me to look up to and depend on Divine Providence in every trouble.'³ In another letter she reminds her mother: 'You used to tell me to love the Will of God – and to submit to it in all things. Your words still often ring in my ears and I bless God that they were my Mother's words to me.'⁴

¹ Paul Gardiner, *An Extraordinary Australian, Mary MacKillop*, E. J. Dwyer, Sydney, 1993: p.15.

² Mary MacKillop, Letter to Flora, 21 August 1867, St Joseph's Congregational Archives, North Sydney.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mary MacKillop, Letter to Flora, 14 September 1869, St Joseph's Congregational Archives, North Sydney.



Mary was born into an extended family whose history in Scotland included ‘musicians, mathematicians, poets and athletes.’⁵ Her grandparents on both sides of the family lived around Melbourne and aunts, uncles and cousins were scattered across the eastern and southern colonies. Mary was especially beloved of her maternal grandfather, Donald McDonald, who used to call her ‘precious thing’ and taught her the Gaelic language. Even though she was only five years old when he was tragically drowned, she treasured the memory of his love throughout her life. When sorrows came thick and fast, Mary would always go to that place within where the deep love of God, experienced in the loves she had known, gave her comfort and strength.

Typically for an oldest child, Mary grew up with a sense of responsibility for the welfare of her family. A cameo of this is provided in the vignette of her heavily-pregnant mother finding it difficult to walk up a hill and being told by little Mary, ‘Lean on me, Mummy!’ How many thousands of people would lean on Mary MacKillop during her life and even as intercessory today as, ever the responsible one, she accompanies us, urging us to respond to God’s call as she did, with generosity and trust.

Birthdays remind us that we each have a purpose in life. As we celebrate the birthday of Mary MacKillop and ponder her ‘infancy narratives’, we thank God that not only did she fulfil her purpose during her earthly pilgrimage, but that God continues to act through her in example and in the remembrance of prayer. Our celebration becomes an act of praise. We praise God for the birth of Mary MacKillop the pioneer, who brought about Father Woods’ dream of a Sisterhood suited to the particular circumstances of early Australia. We thank God for giving her the grace of trust in what she called ‘Divine Providence’, enabling her to get through the darkest of times and to take risks beyond daring. She has shown us that ultimate happiness and fulfillment are found in searching out God’s will for our lives. Above, she has demonstrated to us the power of love.

God’s love continues to be incarnated in the likes of Mary caring for the neglected ones of God’s kingdom; in encouraging the potential of those too afraid to venture into the unknown; in suffering with those hurt by the very Church we love. In the dilemma of the Cross, the birthday of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop reminds us that Jesus’ death gave birth to new life. She embraced her world with its joy and pain. We, like her, must come to know life’s meaning in the language of the Cross. Like her, we will then know Jesus revealed in his ‘infancy narratives’ and in his life and death as the Christ, ‘the power and the wisdom of God.’ (1. Cor. 1:24)

⁵ Gardiner, p. 14.