



Seasons of Grace

Praying with Mary MacKillop

Genevieve Ryan rsj

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PO Box 1508, North Sydney 2059

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Christmas

A Season of Birth and Origins

Christmas is that season of the human spirit when the 'child in us' is coming to birth. God is born in our hearts. Wonder and mystery touch our spirit. At Christmas time we can have a renewed sense of the innocence and openness of children.

For some there may be an awareness of a new journey through a birth process which thrusts them into a passage of life and calls for autonomy, self-expression and discovery. We know that this birthing process is not always easy and gentle but it is exciting and life-giving. A choice to stay in the womb and not risk life is to choose death.

In committing our lives to our Christmas journey we provide the opportunity to come face to face with what is most essential and beautiful in life. Spontaneity, joy and delight can return to our lives, re-energising us, empowering our attitudes and outlook.

In the Gospel readings leading up to Christmas, we meditate upon the genealogy of Jesus. We travel through centuries of new life. We follow the stories of love-making, ancestral pride and promise, startling revelations of betrayal and prostitution, faith-filled families, barrenness becoming fertile, gynaecological wonders and whole generations tracing God's mysterious presence in the depths of their familial roots.

Like so many of our families Jesus had many 'skeletons in his cupboard!' His family line was both blessed and flawed with the same humanity that any one of us might discover when we search through our family tree.

MARYS PRAYER OF BIRTH AND ORIGINS

Mary Mackillop knew this human reality. Her experience of family life was caught up in the painful tension between blessing and giftedness on the one hand and affliction and brokenness on the other. This most surely was often the subject of her prayer. Her prayerfulness with regard to her family is constantly referred to in her letters.

To her mother she writes:

God in His infinite mercy has been extremely good to one and all of us. His greatest blessing has been what to the worldly eye appears a heavy and severe trial, or a continuation of trials, I mean the unfortunate position of our family. Truly your life since I can remember has been a succession of trials.....but your cheerful resignation and confidence in the Divine Goodness, ah! it will solace you now, or at any rate when my duty calls me away from you.²

Oh! but my heart yearns to comfort you, yet cannot do it. Go to our good and merciful God, Mamma, and in His very Holy Will, which you always taught me to revere and love, you will find your only rest.³

To Monsignor Kirby:

He (God) gave me good Catholic parents, a mother that in patience, resignation and suffering seemed to me and to many more, a second Monica. My father had been educated for the Church and had studied very deeply. From him I learned so much of the teachings of our holy Faith.⁴

This prayerful appreciation of her family reminds us that our prayer can encompass our own appreciation and concern for our loved ones, our ancestors and whatever inherited characteristics, blessed or flawed, we carry into the context of our present lives.

OUR PRAYER OF BIRTH AND ORIGINS

Begin with reading the genealogy leading to Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Matthew 1:1-17.

The presence of the four women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba presents us with a surprise that we are not meant to ignore. Normally a Jewish genealogy would not feature women, but these women, who are anything but models of the great Jewish matriarchs are highlighted as critical figures in God's scheme of things.

Matthew wants us to view them as representing 'holy irregularities' in God's plan. We are called to acknowledge that our God has an amazing capacity 'to write straight with crooked lines!' This can prompt us all to re-look at any skeleton we might find in the family cupboard and to gaze with wonder at how the God of surprises has been active in our personal history.

***I**t was you who created my inmost self,
and put me together in my mother's womb;
for all these mysteries*

*I thank you:for the wonder of myself,
for the wonder of your works.*

Ps 139:13-14

As you look with this faith perspective at your family tree, name those who have been significant for you in your journey. Look at those who have nurtured you into life, those who were or are kindred spirits who brought your faith to birth. Do not overlook the 'holy irregularities!' Mary MacKillop would surely have mentioned her father, Alexander, at this point!

In prayer, consider the gifts and strengths which have come into your life from these foremothers and forefathers. What limitations and vulnerability have they passed on to you? How conscious are you of your likeness to these ancestors? How are you different? What aspect of your own spirituality do you wish to pass on to those in the next generation?

With Mary MacKillop, we can pray:

*J*esus, you came into our midst as one of us,
sharing our humanity,
like us in all but our sinfulness.

*You bore the imprint of your family line;
you enjoyed the virtue and quality
of those who lived with integrity.*

*With compassion, you grieved for
those whose lives were broken
or destructive or even scandalous.*

*Enable us to recognise the power of goodness
and creativity that flows into our lives
through our family background.*

*Assure us of your presence
when we face what is flawed
so that your mystery dwells with us at all times.*

*May we grow in wisdom and grace
within our family circle.*



MARY'S PRAYER OF TENDERNESS AND TRUST



Mary MacKillop revealed a tenderness and trust that is childlike in its simplicity. Several glimpses of Mary at prayer help us to see this endearing side of her. For her, God was not a remote, condescending Being but rather a warm, affectionate Presence who holds her, sometimes playfully, sometimes compassionately, always lovingly. The imagery she uses in the following examples gives us a privileged insight into her relationship with God.

Mary had a deep devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The human heart burning with love is the symbol of Christ's mission to the world. Mary was deeply attracted to this image of a love that could not be extinguished.

With reference to the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, she writes:

*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.⁵*

In another letter to Fr. Woods when he was immersed in his own struggles in Adelaide:

*Now laugh at me if you will, but I must tell you the thought
that has just crossed my mind. I cannot describe it better
than to say that just at that moment you seemed to me like
a helpless infant kicking in the Will of God, but the Will of
God seemed so lovingly holding the poor struggling infant
who in spite of himself seemed really glad to stay in it, and
that infant seemed to be you, my Father, and I thought I
was laughing at you there and that the Will of God
seemed almost to be laughing, but so fondly at the same
time.⁶*

Mary MacKillop's early formative years gave her a sense of her essential worth. We are told that her beloved grandfather, Donald MacDonald, referred to her as 'gnothach miadhail', a gaelic expression meaning 'my precious thing'. Annie, Mary's sister, has left us with her witness that Mary was a beautiful child, "People often stopped her nurse just to look at her, she was so like pictures of angels."

Annie referred also to her reflective, responsible nature, "She had a wonderful memory and was always old for her years." We have stories from Annie of the four-year-old Mary telling her mother to lean on her arm, because she was tired, and of a fiery and justice-oriented child who dismissed a drunken nurse on the grounds that she was unfit to care for her baby brother, Donald.

In another situation, this spirited child took a stand against what she regarded was biased, untruthful historical data in a school text and endured the teacher calling her "a little bigot". Once, when staying with Protestant friends, Mary came across a blatantly anti-Catholic book, and she pitched it into the fire! Annie gives references to family teasing and Mary taking this light-heartedly and with an undeniable sense of fun. Other incidents recounted by Annie or Donald reveal that she was, even as a child, spiritually awake, sensitive and affectionate.

In prayer, God is not impressed by our masks, our status or our achievements. Rather, it is the essential beauty of our uniqueness as a human being that is known to God and that we need to re-discover. Our closeness and intimacy with God depends on it. Jesus impressed this on his disciples when he said:

*Let the little children come to me;
do not stop them;
for it is to such as these
that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

I tell you solemnly,
anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God
like a little child will never enter it.

Then he put his arms round them,
laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing.*

Mk 10:14-16

Mary MacKillop seemed to have the capacity to connect with this essential goodness of her own being. Our efforts to meet God in prayer with this simplicity and openness will bring us to a deeper, truer relationship with the Giver of Life.

OUR PRAYER OF TENDERNESS AND TRUST

The Christmas season allows us to be playful and buoyant. It reminds us that our relationship with God can also be child-like and intimate.

The artist Pablo Picasso once shared an insight which can only have been learned in the Christmas seasons of his spirit. He declared, "It takes a long time for one to become young." Sometimes it is important to allow ourselves to be re-juvenated by journeying back through the years to remember how we were as a child, as a young version of the adult we now present to the world.

The Christmas seasons of our spirit invite us to return to our original innocence. We have all at some time or other been caught in the wide-eyed, candid gaze of an infant - held for a moment in its wordless scrutiny. In spite of the squirming discomfort that might arise in us, this encounter is also an invitation to remove our masks, to clear away the fog and to seek the essential goodness in ourselves.

This prayer exercise⁷ provides us with an opportunity to approach the child within us in a guided meditation or 'fantasy-prayer'. Our willingness to undertake this task will enhance our capacity to do as Mary MacKillop did when she approached God with such trust, simplicity and intimacy.

Begin by finding a quiet place where you can be alone and undisturbed for about 30 mins. Settle yourself in a comfortable position, in which you are relaxed, yet alert. Begin to just notice your breathing. Gently and consciously change it until it becomes rhythmical, and slower.

Imagine yourself out in the country on a bright day in June. The sky is a beautiful, deep blue. Puffy clouds are scudding across it. There is a cool breeze. You are very comfortable. Although you are alone in the country, you are enjoying your own company. There is a dirt road near you, one with grass and weeds on both sides and in the middle. Start walking along the road. You are aware of the noises of insects, small animals and birds.

Continue your walk. There's a bend in the road. When you go around it, you see, a bit ahead of you, a child sitting under a tree. Walk toward the child. As you get closer, you become aware that the child is you. The child under the tree is you at age six. Go to the child and greet your child self.

Your child self looks up at you and asks: "How did I get to be you?" Answer your six-year-old-self. Then your child self says, "Will it always be like this?" What do you say?

Then your child self probes you still further. "What might be different?" What do you suggest to your six-year-old-self?

Now the time is coming to leave. Say good-bye to your child-self. Leave the child... Start walking down the road you first took... around the bend... back to where you started. Let the fantasy fade. Come back to this time, this place."

Stay with your thoughts and reflect on your own reactions to this encounter. Follow whatever new directions suggest themselves. Evaluate and judge what decisions and actions you will take. You might even like to talk with a trusted friend about this encounter.

It is possible to imagine that Mary MacKillop might have been accustomed to praying the Magnificat at a time like this.

***M**y soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my saviour; because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid.*

Yes, from this day forward all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name, and his mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him.

He has shown the power of his arm, he has routed the proud of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly.

The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich sent empty away. He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of his mercy according to the promise he made to our ancestors of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.

Luke 1:46-55

For her, such a view of her spiritual journey, might have also brought her to express joy, gratitude and the need to re-examine the directions of her life.

OUR PRAYER OF REPETITION AND CHANT



The power and effectiveness of this prayer form is enjoying a resurgence in our own time. The Indian Jesuit, Anthony de Mello gave us new insight into praying with our hearts through breathing. As we breathe in, we draw God's peace or whatever we most need from God right into the very centre of our being. As we breathe out, we expel all our anxiety or self-blame or distress. In our stressful life-styles this is an extremely suitable and effective way for us to be nourished and sustained. It is healing and therapeutic.

Mantric or repetitive prayer has become popular once again. Inspired by Eastern spirituality, a mantra is a word or a phrase of approximately seven syllables, which is repeated rhythmically in prayer and synchronised with our breathing to draw us into stillness.

The use of this prayer-form facilitates the journey to reach the very essence of our lives and then to live from a deeper source of life. Words like "Jesus" or "Abba" or "Peace" and phrases like, "A pure heart create in me" (Ps 51) or "Be still! Know that I am God" (Ps 46) or "Trust in God still, trust in me" (Jn 14) are ideal for mantric prayer.

Much of the contemporary religious music, for example the Taize chants, proclaim the deep affinity of the human spirit with the chant form of prayer. We can use song to help us to pray in this way:

Have you ever caught yourself with a line of a hymn whirling repeatedly in your mind? You may not be able to remember the entire song or psalm, just a phrase or even the melody.

Note the words of the tunes that you have been humming lately. Sometimes people remark that they have the words of a particular hymn 'on the brain'. The very best advice for us when this happens, is to shift it from the groove in the brain into the centre of our being. With that transposition, we find ourselves at prayer. We can find ourselves in presence of God.

These snatches of song give us valuable clues to tell us what is going on in the deeper levels of our consciousness. It is good to stop and pay attention to the thoughts and images that might emerge in this prayer-phrase.

MARY'S PRAYER IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Mary MacKillop had a very strong devotion to 'the presence of God'. She would pause often and consciously recall the presence of God.

In the busiest person's life this can be an effective way to recall God's presence. Try it with some daily task or activity which you do repeatedly or occasionally and use that as a prompt to recall God's presence with you:

- turning the ignition key in the car
- loading the washing machine
- switching on the computer
- bathing the baby.



FAITH-FILLED TRUST

Our dedication to the Christmas seasons of the spirit will foster within us this trusting and child-like faith. Mary MacKillop was a model of this stance before God. Her communication with God in prayer was simple, direct and profound. Above all, it was loving and trusting.