Monday, October 17th was a glorious Spring day in Melbourne as we gathered to commemorate the anniversary of the Canonisation of St Mary MacKillop - at her Birth-site, where the Josephite story began!

Mary was born on January 15, 1842, at number 7 Brunswick Street Fitzroy (then ‘Newtown’), when the colony of Melbourne was less than seven years settled. She was born on Wurundjeri Land, and so, fittingly, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation were remembered and honoured by Vicki Clark from Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Melbourne in her Acknowledgement of Country.

Sr Colleen O’Dwyer from Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre also welcomed us, reminding us that ‘this “holy place” proudly honours the great holiness of St Mary of the Cross. Her saintly life’, she said, ‘has been described as one which shows us “that God’s face is compassionate, loving, broken, strong, forgiving, the source of hope and filled with our human story.”

The commemorative anniversary ritual, lead by Sisters Colleen, Judith Geddes and Helen Smith, provided us with an opportunity to reflect, firstly, upon the significance of this piece of ‘holy ground’. Through a guided reflection, we were able to return, in our imagination, to this site as it was in 1842. At that time, while many of Melbourne’s early settlers lived in tents, Alexander and Flora MacKillop owned this land, on which stood the tiny Marino Cottage. As we sat or stood facing the ‘footprint’ of the original cottage, a low brick wall enclosing a cottage garden, in which stands a bronze image of Mary and a commemorative plaque, we were invited to reflect on, and share, how it felt to be in this ‘holy place’, and how it must have been then for Mary’s proud young parents, who were recent immigrants from the Scottish Highlands. Sadly, their joy would soon be dampened, as, within months of Mary’s birth, they were to lose their possessions and savings in the financial collapse of ‘Twelve Apostles’ syndicate. Thence began the long saga of the ever-growing MacKillop family’s struggle to make ends meet, and their on-going dependence on the good-will and financial support of their relatives and friends.

Our anniversary ritual then led us to reflect on Mary’s Canonisation, and what it has meant to us. How different was the scene in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy on October 17, 2010! On that day, it was closed to all trams and cars in order to accommodate the thousands of Melburnians who assembled outside number 7 to begin the joyful, colourful, rowdy procession to the Royal Exhibition Building. There, they were joined by thousands more people, who, in the hours leading up to the TV coverage of the Canonisation ceremony in Rome, danced, sang, prayed, celebrated and paid tribute to the remarkable woman whom one of the newspapers dubbed our ‘home-grown heroine’. On this first anniversary of that wonderful day of celebrating ‘Melbourne’s Mary’, the group present at her Birth-site was invited to recall Mary’s strengths and virtues, especially her forgiveness, and then to reflect on ‘What difference has the Canonisation made to my life?’

Celebrating - where Mary was born!
At the conclusion of the ritual, Sr Josephine Dubiel, Victorian Province Leader, thanked all who had been involved in the organisation of this event, the St Vincent’s Hospital Administration which provided the bounteous afternoon tea, and all who attended: a cross section of the many people who, today, are inspired by Mary MacKillop’s loving, selfless life. This included: Sisters of St Joseph - resplendent in their acqua ‘Canonisation scarves’, Josephite Associates, Archdiocesan youth ministers, staff members and students from Penola College, Broadmeadows, and a young mother with two tiny children who played happily on a picnic rug right at the spot where Mary was born!

Much has changed around Brunswick Street since that day in January 1842 when the world was gifted with the birth of this baby girl whose life has made such a difference to the lives of countless people. Marino Cottage is no longer, and Dodgshun House, a large, 2-storied 19th Century heritage-listed building now dominates the property. Originally built and owned by Samuel Gillott, a prominent lawyer and politician who was elected Lord Mayor of Melbourne in 1900, it is owned by the Archdiocese of Melbourne, and currently leased by St Vincent’s Hospital (which it adjoins) as an administrative centre.

On October 17, as I stood there on the ‘holy ground’ of number 7 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, and looked out through the front gate I could not help but wonder what Alexander and Flora MacKillop would make of what is currently happening right over the road from Marino Cottage. They could never have imagined that, in October 2011, they would now be looking at giant cranes and the shell of a new multi-storey building, and hearing a cacophony of sounds emanating from this buzzing construction site. You see, Australian Catholic University is extending its nearby Melbourne campus, and there, right opposite number 7 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy is the site of its soon-to-be-completed National Centre for Health and Wellbeing, which will house the St Mary of the Cross MacKillop Chapel and Plaza, the foundation stone of which was unveiled on October 17, 2010 – the day of their daughter’s Canonisation!

Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre is keen to promote Mary MacKillop’s Birth-site as a place of pilgrimage and prayer. Sr Colleen has told us that: ‘Thanks to the Melbourne Archdiocese, there is now, at Mary’s Birth-site, a lovely, welcoming ‘cottage’ garden and plenty of seating.’

Visitors are very welcome to come and spend time at Mary’s Birth-site: 7 Brunswick St, Fitzroy - weekdays, anytime between 9.00a.m. and 4.30p.m.

Mary Ryan rsj