Charity and Justice: St Mary MacKillop and Australian Society, John Warhurst

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The canonization of Mary MacKillop, the first born and bred Australian to be so honoured by the Church, catapulted Mary -- and indeed the very notion of sainthood -- into the public domain in Australia in quite surprising ways, given that religious matters hardly impinge on public discourse of Australian postmodern secular society.

She was indeed an inspired choice as the subject of Australia’s first home grown canonized saint. She epitomised many of the virtues which Australians prize as quintessentially Australian. She was the archetypal “little Aussie battler,” working indefatigably and valiantly for the welfare of the under-privileged. In spite of powerful and often underhand opposition, she prevailed and won out against the odds. Her mistreatment by some Church authorities made her all the more heroic in Aussie anti-authoritarian eyes.

For those who see with the eyes of faith, there is so much more to be seen. For us Mary, and indeed all of the saints, function as inspiring models of virtue and exemplars of a saintly life. In them we see the theological virtues of faith, hope and love writ large. They serve as a yardstick against which our own progress in virtue and holiness is to be measured. They embody the praxis of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12)—the gospel reading for the Feast of All Saints.

The great moral theologian, Bernard Härting, described the saints in terms of the “apostolate of good example.” Edward Schillebeeckx spoke of them as exegetes of the gospel, who write “a fifth gospel” with their very lives. Vatican II describes them as images of Christ, and as “bright patterns of holiness.” Karl Rahner described the saint is a “creative prototype.” He writes: “They are the initiators and the creative models of the holiness . . . They create a new style; they prove that a certain form of life and activity is a really genuine possibility; they show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in ‘this’ way; they make such a type of person believable as a Christian type.”

We see in them the fundamental features of holiness, the holiness that Mary and all of the canonized saints demonstrate and to which all of us are called:

- First and foremost is an intimacy and radical immediacy in their relationship with God. They remind us of Jesus’ teaching that the first commandment is that “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength,” and, second, that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12: 30-31).
- As we see in Mary, the way of the saints promises no comfort in sanctity. Indeed, in them we see played out the mystery of suffering, the paschal mystery, that lies at the heart of Christian faith and the life of the Church.
- They stand ever in faithful service to the Church, no matter the trials and tribulations they endure, even those suffered at the very hands of Church authorities, as for Mary MacKillop.
- They give living and loving witness to the power of the “dangerous memory” of Jesus, and to the hope that is in us. Karl Rahner writes: “We hope because there are saints.”

In them we see what John Paul II called the “lived theology of the saints.” They have so much to teach us. Their lives are of enduring and universal significance. Here the usefulness of John Warhurst’s book, Charity and Justice: St Mary MacKillop and Australian Society.

It is a pleasure to commend it to you. John draws masterfully on the papers presented at the conference in 2011 entitled, Mary MacKillop: Her Influence on Catholic Social Services: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, and it is no mean feat. He provides a valuable synthesis of the key themes and the wealth of reflections and insights offered at the conference.

I would also wish to commend the work of Australian Catholic Social Justice Council and CSSV for sponsoring this project, including the conference last year.

The book will no doubt prove a valuable resource in particular for those working in the fields of Catholic social services, all the more so for its clarity, succinctness and accessibility.

John begins with a brief biography and reflections on Mary’s life. It is a story that never fails to captivate and inspire.

Even a peremptory study of Mary’s life could not miss two strong features: Mary’s sense of faith and her sense of justice. The inextricable interconnection of the two is tangible in Mary’s life. She reminds us that it should be so for us too.

John moves to reflect on Mary as a model for education and social services; here too the inextricable interconnection is tangible and the message for us just as palpable.

But for Mary, doing good, providing concrete assistance, meeting the immediate need, and delivering social welfare services (to use contemporary jargon) is only a part of the work of the gospel. Advocacy for justice is vital to the work for the poor and disadvantaged, and the work of the kingdom.
This is the Josephite legacy that is Mary’s gift, and a wonderful jewel it is in the Australian Church’s crown. It is a legacy in which all of us are invited to share, each in our own way, according to our particular vocations.

Mary challenges all of us, but most especially those working in or concerned for the fields of education and of social services. We have so much to learn from her, to take inspiration from her, to be encouraged by her, and John succinctly crystallizes these with acuity and insight (and indeed this concluding section is my favourite part of the paper):

- Mary’s unswerving commitment to the poor and marginalized
- The equally unswerving inclusiveness of her vision and sense of mission – Mary brooked no barriers in terms of those with whom she worked (ecumenically, other faiths, etc); and no barriers in terms of those for whom she worked; her focus was on the need for assistance
- A healthy pragmatism – moving with the times, moving according to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged, fund-raising whenever and wherever she could, getting on with the work
- Advocacy was vital to the vision and mission; working for systemic change as well as immediate assistance in response to the presenting need.

John Paul II spoke of the “lived theology of the saints.” In Mary we have a fine exemplar of Catholic social teaching in action, epitomized in her own immortal words: “Never see a need without doing something about it.” Mary is indeed our Australian immortal diamond.

Thanks to the ACSJ Council and CSSV, and to John Warhurst as the writer. It is my pleasure this day to declare this book launched.

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2 John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 27.
3 “Immortal diamonds,” from the poem by Gerard Manly Hopkins, That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire. “In a flash, at a trumpet crash, / I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and / This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, / Is immortal diamond.”