

MARY MacKILLOP FOUNDATION

Melbourne Gala Dinner
18th June, 2010

Guest Speaker - John Ralph AC

I am privileged to speak to you tonight at this dinner in Melbourne of the Mary MacKillop Foundation. Tonight is certainly a joyous occasion. There is a growing feeling of excitement and much to celebrate as we approach the first canonisation of an Australian saint. It will be an exciting time in Rome on 17th October when His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, declares Blessed Mary MacKillop a saint recognized by the Catholic Church.

Without diminishing, in any way, the significance of the coming Canonisation on 17th October, there would few who would have doubted that Mother Mary MacKillop was already numbered among the saints in Heaven. Indeed, this was recognised at the time of her death, when Cardinal Moran stated then that he thought she was worthy to be declared a saint.

Melbourne can claim a special relationship with her because Maria Ellen MacKillop was born in Fitzroy on 15th January, 1842. Her birth place is not very far from where we are dining tonight. While her birth certificate shows her Christian names as 'Maria Ellen', somewhere along the way Maria became known as Mary.

Mary MacKillop was truly a remarkable woman and Fr Paul Gardiner SJ, aptly described her when he titled her authorised biography '*An Extraordinary Australian*'. She accomplished so much in her lifetime and left such a rich legacy that has benefited thousands of people, not only in Australia but also in New Zealand and other parts of the world, stretching from East Timor to Peru.

Aspects of her life have become more widely known and appreciated as the progress towards formal recognition of her sainthood has captured the interest of many people, including many outside the Catholic Church. Her founding of the Order of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, in conjunction with Fr Julian Tenison Woods, in Penola, spread far beyond their imaginings, even within Mary MacKillop's own lifetime. The extent and breadth of the Order in that short time was really remarkable. The continuing development and success of the Order, in the century following the Founder's death, in pursuing its noble objectives has been achieved because it is based on the spirit, character, integrity and saintliness of Mary MacKillop and the legacy she passed on to her successors.

What she achieved in establishing the Sisters of St Joseph from such a modest beginning in a harsh environment would have marked her as the *Extraordinary Australian* that Fr Gardiner described. But there was more to this wonderful woman that made her such a remarkable person. It was her personal qualities, her holiness, her relationship with God and the love she expressed for Him by the love and compassion she showed in a very practical way for the more disadvantaged of

God's people, that made her a saint and that is why she will be canonised in October.

Her path in life was not an easy one. She had to start work at an early age to contribute to the support of the family. But her greatest trial had to be her excommunication by Bishop Sheil of Adelaide, based on false witness and advice. One could imagine how great a torment this would be for a woman of such faith. As Pamela Freeman remarked in her book about Mary MacKillop, one could expect her to feel outrage, anger and self-righteousness at this serious and unfair action being visited upon her. But Mary was forgiving of the bishop's 'mistake' and looked forward to a future reconciliation.²

Her equanimity at a time like this can only be explained by her personal relationship with God, and her confidence in God and submission to God's will. She expressed how she felt:

*'I really felt like one in a dream. I seemed not to realise the presence of the Bishop and priests; I know I did not see them; but I felt, oh, such a love for their office, a love, a sort of reverence for the very sentence which I then knew was being in full passed upon me. I do not know how to describe the feeling, but I was intensely happy and felt nearer to God than I had ever felt before. The sensation of the calm beautiful presence of God I shall never forget.'*³

This quotation provides an inspiring insight into a special soul. Despite the Bishop's pronouncement, many saw the injustice of the Bishop's action, and many priests did not believe that the censure was valid. The Jesuits were among these and quietly gave her Communion. While Mary suffered this injustice, the other sisters were also caused to suffer in no longer being able to wear their habits and continue uninterrupted with their work.

Prior to his death, Bishop Sheil realised how he had been misled by his Vicar General, Fr Horan, and instructed that the censure be lifted and this was done on a basis which acknowledged that the censure had not been valid. Mary MacKillop was obviously a woman of indomitable spirit and commitment. Despite the treatment she had received, she carried on, with determination to provide education to those who sorely needed it and, through her Sisters, to provide other services for indigenous and other deserving people.

Mother Mary MacKillop went on to leave a marvellous legacy and, more importantly for her, to earn a place in Heaven. Her legacy was the Order of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart, known more colloquially as the Josephites or Joeys, who have continued the work that the soon-to-be-canonised St Mary of the Cross began more than a century ago.

So tonight we acknowledge and honour this wonderful woman and thank God for her and what she did in dedicating her life in His service. There are many around the world, including many in Victoria, who have been the beneficiaries of her legacy. While our focus is on this saintly woman, I would urge that we should also pause for a moment, and recognise the current members of the Josephite Order and, indeed members of religious orders generally, who make the great sacrifice of giving their lives for the service and good of others.

The Sisters of St Joseph do not look for the easy tasks. From the beginning they have gone to isolated and, often primitive, locations to educate and to support and minister in the name of their Creator. They take to heart in a serious way, Christ's promise and request:

'As long as you do it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you do it to me.'

The Josephites truly identify with those they serve, and take to heart the emphasis that Christ, himself, gave to "the least". The new DVD *'Mary MacKillop; Soul of the Sunburnt Country.'* chronicles many of the places where the Josephites serve and what sacrifices they make.

The DVD gives us a glimpse of the sacrifices the Sisters cheerfully accept and makes reference to the supreme sacrifice of Sister Irene McCormack, an Australian nun, who was executed in Peru by the Shining Path, shot in the back of the head by a young woman member of that organisation. Sister Irene's crime was that she was helping to alleviate poverty in the community she was serving. I believe we have to regard her as a martyr who gave her life in carrying out Christ's work among the poor and oppressed. I think it is a safe assumption that she is now a companion of Mary MacKillop in Heaven.

Women and men who enter the religious life certainly do not do this for any temporal reward. They have their eye on a more enduring prize. Entering the religious life has always involve sacrifice and giving up things they might have otherwise enjoyed. I believe we have to admire more than ever those currently faithful to the vows they made, in the more materialistic and self centred world in which we now live.

Tonight's function has three purposes. The first is to celebrate the coming Canonisation, the first for an Australian saint. My wife and I are very much looking forward to being in St Peter's Square on 17th October and celebrating with thousands of other Australians when the Holy Father makes the announcement and the picture of St Mary of the Cross is unveiled for all to see and venerate.

The second is to acknowledge those who have followed Mother Mary of the Cross and faithfully carried, and carry, on the work she started. They are very special people who follow their vocation and are about to share in the wonderful experience of having their Founder declared canonized saint in their life time. It is a wonderful endorsement of the charism of their under which they follow faithfully in carrying out the works of their Order. One cannot imagine a more joyous and happy event for them and we join them in their joy, and congratulate them.

The third purpose of tonight's dinner is to tell you a little about the Mary MacKillop Foundation which was established by the Order with the object of supporting small life changing projects. You have just heard about one of these projects. Since 1995, the Foundation has funded 278 **'small, life changing projects'**. These projects all been in direct response to the needs of rural and isolated communities, indigenous and other disadvantaged groups, and people with disabilities.

The foundation has also funded ***Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tertiary Scholarships*** over the last decade, 30 recipients have graduated and another 28 are currently enrolled.

Grants to individual projects and for scholarships are for less than \$10,000 and are usually for the ones that fall between the cracks and are not supported by other charities or government funding. By supporting these small life changing projects, the Foundation is able to help to keep Mary MacKillop's works alive across the country. It was this focus by her that made Mary MacKillop so special to the people of Australia.

If you would like to know more about what the Foundation does, and the kind of projects it supports, you will find this on the Foundation's website: www.mackillopfoundation.org.au. What you will discover is that the Foundation and the work of the Order reflect the guiding principles of the Founder, leveraging off modest resources to achieve meaningful and worthwhile results.

I hope that, in becoming more aware of the activities in which the Mary MacKillop Foundation is engaged with the Josephites, you will be encouraged to consider helping in advancing these worthy projects by contributing to the funding of them. You are already doing this, of course, by participating in tonight's dinner.

On behalf of the Foundation, may I express appreciation to the sponsors who have generously supported tonight's function. These sponsorships were structured such that half of the funds contributed by each sponsor go to a specific project of the Mary MacKillop Foundation.

I know that the organisers of tonight's event are planning to repeat it annually, as they do in Sydney. I hope that tonight's sponsors will continue their support and that others will join them to expand the capacity of the Foundation to help carry on the work of St Mary of the Cross. Please enjoy the remainder of the evening.

John Ralph

Notes:

1. An Extraordinary Australian, MARY MacKILLOP. Paul Gardiner SJ
 2. Mary's Story. Kairos Catholic Journal 20/9/2009 – 3 /10/2009.
 3. An Extraordinary Australian, MARY MacKILLOP. Paul Gardiner SJ
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