**ST MARY OF THE CROSS MACKILLOP**

Mary MacKillop was born in a suburb of what is now Melbourne on January 15, 1842 when European settlement in Australia was a mere 54 years old. The first settlers had arrived in 1788 in 11 ships carrying 1300 people, of whom there were some officers with the remainder convicts. A few years later the new settlers from England were free men and women followed some years later by large numbers of both Irish and Scottish migrants. In 1817 the name of the country was changed from New Holland to Australia governed from England with the colony of New South Wales enjoying some jurisdiction. In 1851 Victoria was given the status of a colony so technically Mary MacKillop was born and died in New South Wales. In 1901 the colonies came together under a federal government and became one nation, although to this day remains part of the British Commonwealth.

The saddest result of the colonisation was the displacement of the aboriginal people who had 500 clans/groups speaking 700 languages when the colonisers arrived. Over a short space of time they were outcasts in their own land.

Conditions in the mid-nineteenth century were still appallingly primitive. Poverty was rife especially in country areas, religious discrimination was widespread, the plight of the aboriginal people was deplorable, unemployment was common-place and communication was difficult in the extreme. Travel over any distance was for the fearless and tough. Roads were merely tracks through the bush, travel by steamer was not for the faint-hearted and trains were rare. Mary used all means to visit her sisters. The Irish migrants tended to be Catholic and were discriminated against both for their religion and place of origin. The Church had few priests to serve its people who were scattered around rural areas and, as a rule, were experiencing poverty. Education was limited and, virtually non-existent in rural areas.

Mary was the first of eight children of Scottish immigrants, Alexander MacKillop and Flora MacDonald. These Catholic parents imbued their children with a great love of their faith. Alexander had studied for the priesthood in Rome for seven years. He migrated to Australia arriving in Sydney in January 1838. He made his way to Melbourne where he met Flora MacDonald who had arrived there in April 1840 with her mother, Catherine and brother, Donald (another son having died during the voyage). Catherine’s husband, Donald joined them in April 1842. Alexander married Flora in July 1840 in a small wooden chapel thought to be the site of the present St Francis Church. When the officiating priest, Fr Geoghegan, met Flora a few months later she was pregnant with Mary. He gave her a relic of the Holy Cross to be worn until the baby was born and then returned to him.

The family was poor, the father often without work because he dabbled in business and politics. The family moved frequently and often needed to borrow money. Mary is quoted as saying, “My life as a child was one of sorrow, my home when I had it, a most unhappy one”. Because of the poverty of the MacKillops and frequent moves (at least fifteen), Mary, in her teens, was called upon to assist the family finances by finding employment, first in a stationery shop, and later as a governess and teacher. At one period, Mary went as governess to the children of her uncle and aunt, Alexander and Margaret Cameron, who owned a farm in Penola, South Australia. It was here that Mary befriended a neglected part-aboriginal child called Nancy Bruce. She cared for her and taught her and the other children from the farm. A few years ago Nancy’s descendants proudly attended a celebration in Penola and extolled Saint Mary’s role in their family history.

From a young age, Saint Mary had increasingly felt the call to live as a religious sister but she still had the obligation to care for her family, a burden she undertook from when she was sixteen to twenty five. While working as a governess in Penola, she met Father Julian Tenison Woods who was parish priest of a large part of South East Australia. In fact, his parish was about the size of England. At that period of Australian history, schools, medical care and any form of social services were lacking, especially for the poor. The Catholic rural poor were especially disadvantaged. Mary’s dream of a free education for such children corresponded with the dream of Father Woods. He became her mentor and spiritual director and encouraged her vocation. Together, they developed a plan for a congregation of sisters who would work wherever there was a need but especially in rural areas. They would live in small convents or in whatever style of dwelling – shanties, tents, mud huts – that the local people had. It was a courageous plan. Women had little or no role in the social framework of the times, could not vote or run for public office. They were shut out of all institutions of power and barred from universities, political and business life. The situation was not much different in the Church of that period, a situation that later led to problems for the new Institute.

In January 1866 the plan was put into action. Mary and her two sisters, Annie and Lexie, began teaching in Penola, South Australia, in a stable refurbished by her brother, John. A few weeks later, on March 19, 1866, Mary began to wear a simple black dress as did Lexie and another young woman, Blanche Amsinck, to indicate their dedication to God. From this small beginning, with the encouragement and mentoring of Father Woods, the Congregation of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart was born.

On the advice of Father Woods, Mary moved to the main South Australian city of Adelaide. On August 15, 1867 Mary and her companions professed the three vows of, poverty, chastity and obedience. Mary took the name Sister Mary of the Cross.

In Adelaide, the founding women were joined by other young women, who all lived very poorly and largely dependent on the generosity of the people. Before long, the sisters had responded to needs in rural areas where they provided, without payment, elementary teaching in religion and secular subjects to children who, otherwise had no hope of education. Soon afterwards Mary’s charitable heart opened to the destitute and elderly who were friendless and abandoned in a harsh society without any social welfare. By 1869 there were sixty sisters working in schools, orphanages and refuges for women.

Father Woods and Saint Mary envisaged the sisters being governed centrally by one superior and being free to go wherever there was a need anywhere in the colonies. In a short time, therefore, the sisters could be found in the other colonies and in New Zealand. The system of governance was contrary to that experienced in most European religious congregations of the time and was the cause of disputes with some of the bishops as the fledgling Institute expanded.

A complex set of circumstances led to the Bishop of Adelaide, who was once her friend and benefactor, excommunicating Mary in September 22, 1871 for supposed disobedience. This excommunication was invalid and unjustified in the light of later information. Mary accepted the excommunication and the dismissal of many of her sisters with serenity and peace. The Bishop revoked the sentence before his death less than six months later. Mary returned to her work and the majority of the sisters, who had been sent away, returned to the Institute. They were dark days.

Mary was advised to go to Rome to seek the help of Pope Pius IX. In this period the type of institute that Mary envisaged was largely unknown. Most congregations of women were cloistered. Institutes where the members lived and worked in the community were an innovation. They were few and were technically “tolerated” by the Vatican until 1901 when such institutes whose members were not cloistered came to be known as Apostolic religious institutes. Moreover, institutes of women were then under the authority of the bishop in whose diocese they lived and the bishop had full control over their manner of living.

For Mary, crucial for the institute was the concept of central government – a system where the female superior would be free to send the sisters anywhere there was a need, rather than be confined to a particular diocese under the authority of a bishop. While in Rome, Mary did not receive final approval for the institute – this came in 1888 – but she did receive encouragement from many and especially from her three meetings with Pope Pius IX. She returned to Australia with support for central government and clear instructions on how the affairs of the Sisters were to be organised and with changes to the ideal that the sisters could not own anything. They had hoped to depend totally on the Providence of God but the Pope decreed they must own sufficient housing for the members and have some income.

Back in Australia, further problems arose. The Bishops of Bathurst and Brisbane, Irish brothers, did not know of the new developments so could neither understand nor accept their loss of complete control over the sisters in their dioceses. In 1875 all but two sisters from Bathurst returned to Adelaide and the Bishop established a diocesan community, thereby causing a split. In 1879 the sisters withdrew from Brisbane. Following further misinformation, Mary, in November 1883, was ordered to leave Adelaide for Sydney, where in 1885 she was deposed as Mother General. It was not until 1899 that the sisters were free to elect her again as their Mother General, an office she held until her death. She accepted these harsh changes and still retained respect for the bishops and priesthood and encouraged her sisters to do the same.

In her lifetime, communities of sisters were established in all Australian states and New Zealand. By the time of her death in 1909 there were 650 sisters in the congregation ministering in schools, orphanages and aged care in cities, towns and isolated rural settings.

Mary’s legacy is multifaceted. She is remembered throughout Australia not so much for the offices she held or the works she did but for who she was as a person. She was revered in the secular society for her care of and support for “Aussie battlers”. Pope John Paul II said at the time of her beatification in Sydney, “Because the love of God inflamed her heart, she tenaciously defended the weak, the poor, the suffering and all those on the margins of society. She worked to assist women and families in distress and to eradicate ignorance among the young…In her, the unwanted, the unloved and those alienated from society found comfort and strength.” (John Paul II at the Domain, Sydney,18/01/1995). The following day he preached at her beatification, “With gentleness, courage and compassion, she was a herald of the Good News among the isolated "battlers" and the urban slum-dwellers.”

Today, Australia and the world need a model of holiness and a powerful message of the saving love of God in the prevailing social context. Australia at this time in its history has, as in Mary’s day, an influx of migrants from many nations, religions and cultures, seeking a better way of life for themselves and their families. There are thousands of refugees from war-torn and ravaged countries all seeking peace. There is high unemployment, there is an economic recession, there are many broken families, there is sexual abuse by members of the Church and others, there are ethical questions not faced before. The legacy of Mary MacKillop has something to say to those who live in such circumstances. She is a sign of hope for them, a powerful image of what one person can do to make a difference.

Mary was:

* a woman of dignity;
* a woman caring for all in need as far as resources permitted;
* a woman who was resilient and resourceful;
* a woman who demanded to be heard in a society where women were voiceless;
* a woman who tested boundaries;
* a woman who had respect and care for clergy and bishops while not permitting herself or her to be unfairly dominated by them;
* a woman who never discriminated on the basis of race or religion;
* a woman who was truly ecumenical before the idea of ecumenism became popular;
* a woman who felt for and with migrants reminding her sisters and others, “*Be kind to the poor foreigners. Remember that I was a foreigner once*”. (1875)”;
* a woman who respected and cared for aboriginal people.
* a woman who saw education for rural children as a ticket to freedom.
* a woman whose contribution to secular society led to her being named one of the extraordinary women pioneers of the country.
* a woman who gave courage to women from cultures where women are not valued and to women striving to find a genuine role in the mission of the Church;
* a woman whose life became known and revered around the world.
* a woman who radically believed in the Providence of a loving God;
* a woman so immersed in her relationship with that loving God that she exhorted her followers, “Believe in the whisperings of God to your heart. Believe in him. Believe in the power of the Spirit of love”.

During his visit to Sydney for World Youth Day in July 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, in speaking of Mary MacKillop, said “I know that her perseverance in the face of adversity, her plea for justice on behalf of those unfairly treated and her practical example of holiness have become a source of inspiration for all Australians”. Mary’s holiness was recognized after a process spanning 85 years. She was canonized in Rome on October 17, 2010 and is now a model of holiness for the universal Church. It was written after her baptism that she was gifted with Power, Presence and Promise. Her life was a remarkable fulfilment of these gifts.

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