The Other Marys: Lessons for us Today

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10 minutes

1. My first point is a broad and general one: the records that enable us to tell the stories of the past are resources that we need to value. We are enriched by being able to access something of the complexity of the lives of these two Marys. And they might have been forgotten. Many others have been. Vibrant and powerful stories of women religious depend on good archives that are kept well. That’s an important investment in the future.

I am so grateful that the Josephite community kept the memory of Mary MacKillop, and that the Loreto and CJ community kept the memory of Mary Ward– and indeed fought hard to reclaim and recover the stories of her as their foundress..

By keeping the memory, I mean something much more dynamic and lively than telling a single, static story. I mean keeping and preserving the raw materials of documentation so that when the questions change and new generations need to see MacKillop and Ward through a different lens in order to appreciate and understand their lives, the letters and notebooks and accounts, and the handwriting, and the documents are there – so that new questions that no one thought of in 1646 or 1902 can be answered.

Tiffany Shellam’s beautiful book *Meeting the Waylo* about Aboriginal Australian sailors uses the metaphor of the tide to explain how we learn from archives.

As the questions flood in, the material that communities hold

reveal[s] or delete[s] different voices or perspectives, illuminat[es] one story while washing away another…When the tide of history changes, a power surge occurs as different questions move the archive and unsettle the present landscape. Other stories drown in the archive, or they lie dormant waiting to become charged with energy as historians and archivists connect the present with the past. (p.10)

So, the first thing I want to say, especially as many religious houses of women face hard choices about what to do with the records of their life, is that those papers are valuable because we don’t even know yet what questions they will help us answer.

I think we learn from the complex and ongoing exploration of the life and writing of Mary Ward and of Mary MacKillop that strong archival collection policies are not about preserving the past; they are an investment in the future when they resource new understanding of the life.

1. My second point is one that I think will be obvious to members of communities of faith but it isn’t always so obvious to historians, at least not in Australia. It’s simply that if we are going to understand the lives of these two Mary’s we need to take *faith* seriously.

If we remember either Mary for her particular actions or qualities, for being excommunicated or establishing a successful network of outreach to the poor, for being educators, for daring to think that women could be involved in ‘mission’ in Reformation England, we misunderstand. We need to remember each of them above all as a *believer*. The conviction that God is to be trusted, that Jesus really is the model of freedom, defined her commitments before anything else.

Historians are still refining the tools to deal well with faith and belief. The whole idea of the ‘soul’ as a category of historical discussion unnerves some people. Western European assessment of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ is often about achievements that fit agreed goals. But paying attention to these two women means we have to take seriously that they were women of conviction. They cannot be explained by the tasks they undertook.

Both of them were very clear that life was for others. But the good work they were doing was not an end in itself. Their sense of purpose came from elsewhere.

Mary Ward remarked ‘When I have finished business, I go to find myself in God’. MacKillop’s letters are often preoccupied with business, but underpinned by faith. She modelled a commitment to 'above all get help in prayer', and was ready to welcome a change for the good even from people who had given her most trouble because 'you will be surprised what Grace can do'.

They also show us that lives of faith are not lives of ecclesiastical docility, indeed faith is about confidence and the capacity to embrace change. It is not docile at all.

1. This second point, that we need to learn to foreground their faith in understanding them, is linked to my third and final point: that they trusted in their own experience of God, and they found God was at work in their own particular context. Our context is not their context but we can learn from their principle of discernment, and their confidence that however unpredictable the path might seem, a good way forward would emerge. Living a Mary Ward life does not mean always writing in lemon juice, living a Mary MacKillop life does not mean wearing a lot of brown.

It does mean, being steady and clear-eyed and confident about whatever follows from a particular vocation.

Confidence is a key term I think because it enables authority – not just the simple exercise of power. Both Ward and MacKillop exercised authority, both were ‘strong women’, but they did not fall into the mainstream pattern of power.

Ward wanted to model the Institute on the Jesuits but knew and accepted (perhaps liked) the reality that SJ constitutions forbad a female branch.

MacK. Wanted central governance not episcopal control .

Both were women in leadership when that was far rarer than it is now, and also more dangerous. Expecting that women would step forward to do as God intended, Ward wrote famously : ‘There is no such difference between men and women that women may not do great things.  I hope in God it will be seen that women in time will do much.  Women should and can provide something more than ordinary.’ They teach us that there is a far horizon to keep your eye on, rather than the immediate press of concerns, and the women as well as men, are called to leadership.

Saintly role models do not usually define comfortable boundaries; the best ones expand what a community imagines itself to be.