

Tenacious in God's service
Homily for the Centenary of the Death of Blessed Mary MacKillop
Australian Catholic University (ACU National)
North Sydney Campus (MacKillop), 12 August 2009

A century ago the times were a changin'. Marconi received the Nobel Prize for inventing the radio and Einar Dessoix began the first regular broadcasts. Ernest Shackleton found the South magnetic pole and Louis Bleriot was first to fly across the English Channel. 1909 was also a year for building: construction began in Belfast on the *RMS Titanic*; in Israel, the city of Tel Aviv was founded; in Hawaii, the US navy built a base at Pearl Harbor. Closer to home, Errol Flynn was born in Hobart; Alfred Deakin won a third term as Prime Minister; and James Murray, for 44 years the bishop of Maitland-Newcastle and elder statesman of the Australian Church, died. Joan of Arc at last joined the list of the blessed in a nation of many saints; but in Australia that same year our only beata (so far) lay dying only a few yards away from here. Mary MacKillop, long troubled by rheumatism and wheelchair-bound for seven years after a stroke, was now ready for God. On 8 August 1909, at 9:30 in the morning, our blessed entered eternal blessedness.

Mary's was in some ways a very different world to ours. It may surprise some of the students here that there is archeological evidence of civilisations that did not have photocopiers, the internet or even computers! Not only was there no television in Mary's day but not even radio yet. Public electricity, newly available in Sydney (1904), had not yet made its way across the harbour, so the convent here relied upon oil lamps for light and coal for heat. The Sydney Harbour Bridge with its electric trains was a distant dream and ferries and foot were the normal way to the city. It was a world without airplanes, only 'unsinkable' ships like the *Titanic*, which if they made it to Europe took several weeks to get there. There were still areas of the earth barely explored and places we take for granted still unbuilt.

When Mary Ellen MacKillop was born (15 January 1842) in Fitzroy, nearby what is now the Melbourne campus of ACU, Elizabeth Street was still a deep gully and what is now Lonsdale Street was virgin bush. Few Australian children at this time received regular schooling and most teachers were poorly paid, poorly resourced and themselves poorly educated. Mary was home-schooled by her father who, as an ex-seminarian, also shared his passion for the Catholic faith. Though her Scots parents only ever achieved a medium-sized family of eight children, Mary had to help support them. From the age of 14 she worked as a shop assistant, child-carer and teacher.

It was in Penola in South Australia that she met Julian Tennyson Woods and her vocation. He was parish priest of 56,000 square kilometres and desperate for help with the religious education of the outback children. Mary Ellen, whose motto was to be "Never see a need without doing something about it" joined him in starting a free Catholic school and then a religious congregation in honour of St Joseph, who schooled the child Jesus. With the veil she took the name 'Mary of the Cross', a premonition not just that the sickness and poverty she had already known would dog her all her life, but also of misunderstanding from her co-founder, from some pastors of the Church and even from some of her own sisters. But Mary's upbringing in adverse circumstances made her hardy, like her iconographical emblem the eucalyptus. It also made her simpatico with the needs of children isolated in the bush or in the new cities, who like the bush Jesus of our Gospel this evening, looked to the birds of the air and the flowers of the fields for their dreams and inspiration (*Matthew* 6:25-34).

As Pope John Paul II observed, "Blessed Mary MacKillop was not daunted by the great desert, the immense expanses of the outback, nor by the spiritual wilderness which affected so many of her fellow citizens. Rather, she boldly prepared the way of the Lord in the most trying situations... She knew that behind the ignorance, misery and suffering which she encountered there were people yearning for God and His righteousness." (John Paul II, *Homily for the Beatification of Mary MacKillop*, 1995) So Mother Mary devised her system of education suited to the basic needs of what we now call 'rural and remote' children: the 'four Rs' of reading, writing, arithmetic and religion. She had a wonderful sense of the privilege that is teaching, the sharing of human learning and sacred wisdom with those who come after us. I trust that that sense of reverence for the teaching craft, for the knowledge it imparts, and for the children and young adults it serves, is still cultivated on this campus dedicated to her memory, and throughout the university, especially amongst the teachers it prepares.

Mary of the Cross' confidence that with God's help she could do something for the poor and needy, no matter how far away they were or how few her resources, spoke of her tremendous confidence in Providence after the teaching of Christ in tonight's Gospel passage. She knew that if God wanted the Gospel taken to the most distant lands, he would provide for its carriers. This made her a natural patron for World Youth Day last year, with its focus on the witness young people are called to give to Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. In such a spirit Mary MacKillop was destined to be Mother to an extraordinary network of religious women, convents, institutions and caring projects. But teaching more than building institutions was her passion, and it is recorded that "She was gifted with rare fluency and earnestness in giving religious instruction, and very frequently gave her Sisters and children the benefit of the same." I'm not sure if the provincials and local superiors still give not only the children but the sisters religious instruction today!

Perhaps there was more than earnest and trust in providence at work here. Mary was a very determined miss, what in ordinary people we call 'stubborn', 'uncompromising' and 'unrelenting' but in saints we call being 'inspired', 'focussed' and 'resolute'.

Last year Pope Benedict XVI named her amongst the ‘*tenacious*’ young builders of Australia’s social and spiritual heritage and said she stood out for her ‘*sheer determination*’ (Benedict XVI, *Welcome Address at Barangaroo*, 17 July 2008). Of course, sheer determination to do good always annoys some people and success annoys them more. In Mary’s case it evoked jealousy and malicious gossip. Stories reached her bishop’s ears and this famously led to her temporary excommunication. That must have horrified her, for Mary loved the Church and the sacraments deeply. She still teaches us today, I think, to cling to holy Mother Church, even in time of trial, even if some of our pastors sometimes disappoint us.

Even when she was suffering exile from convent, church and classroom, Mary continued to teach us by her example. “As the holy people whom God loves,” Paul tells us in our First Reading (*Colossians 3:12-17*), you must be clothed in the habit of heartfelt compassion, generosity and humility, gentleness and patience, forbearing and forgiving each other.” That was our Mary’s habit. She waited humbly and without bitterness, confident God and the Church would vindicate her. This no-nonsense, unpretentious woman accepted people as they were and had deep compassion even for those who misunderstood her. No doubt her bush children could have suggested some choice names for the bishop who had mistreated her, but she called him simply “my poor dear bishop” and before too long he apologized and restored her to full communion.

Fortunately, Church authority usually supported her. When she visited the Pope in 1873, he was impressed by her intelligence and determination and he granted her appointment as Mother-General with extraordinary powers. Perhaps he recognised her exemplary persistence in adversity, her unbreakable love for God and his Church, her resolute passion for the needy. This led to an extraordinary network of convents, schools and orphanages all over Australia and New Zealand, as well as shelters for the homeless and destitute of any age and refuges for ex-prisoners and ex-prostitutes. By this date one hundred years ago, there were 650 Joeys across Australia and New Zealand, forming 12,000 children. Nowadays there are twice that number, and they have spread as far afield as Scotland and Ireland, East Timor, Peru and Brazil, a living tribute to her life, work and faith.

On arrival for the World Youth Day celebrations last year, the Pope noted came to this chapel to pray before the tomb of Blessed Mary MacKillop and to meet her daughters. He declared that she was “one of the most outstanding figures in this country’s history” (Benedict XVI, *Address at Government House*, 17 July 2008). He praised her perseverance in the face of adversity, her impassioned plea for justice on behalf of those unfairly treated, and her practical example of holiness. We all have reason to be grateful to her, he said, and to her collaborators in her order and other congregations for what they built in this country. This university has cause to be grateful too, as the genealogy of this campus goes back to Mary and her first sisters. We need new Mary MacKillops today. We need this university to form them. Mary continues to challenge us, in our very different Australia of one century later, to identify the spiritual out-backs, whether they are out bush or in heart of our cities and suburbs, to identify the old and new kinds of poverty, to find the needy young and not-so-young, and to bring them Christ, his Church and his Gospel. Blessed Mary MacKillop, pray for us!