

Centenary of Mary MacKillop's Death, 8 August 1909

**Public Lecture given by Fr Paul Gardiner, SJ, Postulator of the Cause for
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When Mary MacKillop died in Sydney just a hundred years ago, people behaved in a way that has rarely, if ever, been seen before or since in this country. At her lying-in they touched her body with rosaries, holy pictures, and other pious objects, and after her interment at Gore Hill they took home little scoops of earth from around her grave. This behaviour has never been characteristic of Australians. It occurred in 1909 not because a great educator and a tireless social worker had passed away, but because people wanted a relic of someone who had lived in close union with God.

It would be rash to deny that there have been many holy people in Australia, but our culture does not readily allow us to imagine that there has been a saint in the land. Yet people everywhere were convinced that Mother Mary's holiness was of an exceptional order. It was noticed that prelates and other clergy were unusually reverent as they visited her in her dying days. At her funeral Cardinal Moran, a man not given to flights of imagination, let it be known that he considered her worthy of the honours of the altar, that is, that she could ultimately be canonized. Five years later her body was transferred to the chapel of her convent in North Sydney, and her tomb there has been a centre of devotion ever since. Three popes have knelt in prayer before it.

In 1925 steps were taken to initiate the Cause of Mary's Canonization. The history of this Cause is in itself a fascinating topic, and I shall speak of it briefly later in this lecture. But what I have to say will mainly concern Mary herself and the significance of the expected proclamation of her sainthood, an event we have grounds to hope for in the not too distant future.

She was born in Melbourne in January 1842, the first of eight children of Scottish migrants, Alexander MacKillop and Flora MacDonald. As they handed on to her the Catholic Faith, to which their ancestors had held fast through centuries of persecution, she learnt to love God and to revere his will. She spoke in later life of her gratitude for this precious gift, and recalled how from an early age she had had a lively sense of God's presence. She felt he was calling her to a life of simple poverty in the service of his poor, but she had to wait until her twenty-fifth year before this became possible. Her father – though a good and sincerely religious man - was not a successful money-earner, and his eldest daughter found herself at the age of sixteen with the duty of earning money to provide for the family.

After working for two years in a business in Melbourne she moved to Penola, a small town in the southeast of South Australia, to become a governess. The priest there was Father Woods – Julian Tenison Woods, a man described by his biographer as "one of the most singular and engaging figures to be met with in the ways of biography." He was concerned that in the vast area under his care the children had no education, secular or religious. In the course of time the young woman's latent vocation and the priest's problem found a single solution in the great religious enterprise known as the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. This has justly been called the most significant single initiative taken in the Church in Australia in the nineteenth century.

Mary became Sister Mary of the Cross at Penola in 1866. After small beginnings there in a converted stable, and then in a larger "school-house" that still stands, she left Penola and

settled with a handful of companions in Adelaide. Others joined them there and before long the group had members in other parts of Australia and in New Zealand. They depended on alms for everything, never asking for money for their services. Besides primary schools they cared for anybody in need, orphans, old people, young women in danger, and friendless men and women of all ages.

This Institute was a new kind of thing in Australia. It had friends, but it had enemies also, so to secure stability Mary was sent to Rome in 1873 to obtain the approval of the Holy See for the Rule Father Woods had written for it. She was received favourably there, and had several encouraging audiences with Pope Pius IX. She returned to Australia with a modified Rule, being assured that after some years of trial it could be given final approval. Her election as Mother General in 1875 was the prelude to thirty-four years of burdensome life - long journeys by land and sea in extremes of weather in primitive conveyances, the writing of thousands of letters, struggles to obtain the necessities of life, the hardships of real poverty, and throughout it all chronic ill-health.

But the most distressing crosses came from people, sometimes in high places. There had already been the nasty farce of the pseudo-excommunication in Adelaide in 1871, but the situation that developed there in 1883, though less spectacular as fodder for journalistic history, caused even deeper distress to Mother Mary and proved even more striking evidence of her heroic virtue. These and other episodes of tension with bishops (notably in Bathurst and Brisbane) were not just about policy, and they cannot be dismissed as clashes of personalities or of strong wills. They all concerned law, authority, and existing obligation. Besides being very holy Mary MacKillop was very intelligent, and she understood clearly the binding power of a vow and the nature and limits of authority.

The trouble arose when bishops tried to tell the Sisters that their vows bound them to whatever the bishops said they bound them to. Mary knew that the vows bound the young women to what they intended by them – to live by the Rule of a Congregation under the centralised authority of a Mother General – no more, no less, and no other. A bishop can only control the internal affairs of a Religious Congregation if its members have not already taken vows to live by a different Rule or are Sisters legitimately dispensed from vows already taken.

Mary received specific instructions in Rome - to take home and observe the Rule of a Congregation governed by a Mother General. No bishop had authority to tell her to ignore this directive, as one put it “pending an appeal to Rome”. She made it clear that the Roman authorities had already spoken: “It is not implied wishes but positive injunctions I received from there”, she wrote in 1877. Any changes that were thought desirable were to be submitted to Rome for a decision, but nobody – no bishop, no Mother General nor any other - had authority to change anything in the meantime. She really had no choice. She could not cooperate with bishops who expected her to do otherwise than what she had been told to do by a higher authority. She was not prepared to disobey the instructions, and ignore the nature of the Sisters’ vows, in the interests of temporary local harmony, retreating in the face of rhetoric, honey-tongued or bullying as the case might be. She had to do her duty, and cope with any tension that might result as firmly as necessary, but as respectfully as possible.

Those who mishandle history and represent her as a rebel, a maverick, a lawless free-spirited innovator, could not be further from the truth. It would be hard to find any character in the history of Australia who had greater respect for law and authority than Mary MacKillop. She respected human authority, knowing that all authority comes from God, but she had an even greater reverence for authority within the Church. This was due to the sense of the divine which had possessed her from her earliest years. No one has seen God, but he became visible in Jesus Christ, and when Christ disappeared from this world he left himself

discoverable in his brethren. "As often as you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me." Some of these brethren, with all their limits and deficiencies, occupy positions of authority within his Church. To these he had said, "He that hears you hears me".

Mary MacKillop revered priests and bishops because she believed in their divine anointing and because she stood in awe of the Eucharistic mystery of which they were the ministers. She wrote once that she "would prefer to have a dagger in her heart than a word be spoken against God's anointed." She taught this respect to her Sisters, though she knew that God's anointed were at times tainted with human weakness. She had learnt this distinction early in life, as she never allowed her respect for her father to be affected by her dismay at his inability to provide for his family.

What she suffered during these distressful episodes is sometimes astonishing to read, but even more astonishing is the story of her charity and forbearance towards those who were unjust or unkind to her. She judged nobody, she blamed nobody, she was never heard to utter a word of criticism or bitterness and never allowed others to do so. She always tried to excuse those who had wronged her, called attention to their good qualities, and reminded her Sisters of favours received from them in the past.

St Paul described Mary perfectly to his Corinthians: "Love is always patient and kind, ... it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances, ... it is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes (1 Cor.13)." Mary had plenty of opportunities to do exactly the opposite of all this. She certainly had more than enough grievances to brood over, and what she endured would have provoked a stone to anger. But she made allowances for the grossest behaviour, excused the inexcusable, and repaid unkindness with a sweetness that astonished those who witnessed it. She handled her challenges with incredibly patient Christian charity.

None of this features prominently in secular accounts of Mary MacKillop. There is acknowledgment of her work, as when the *Australian* newspaper recently spoke of her as "an Australian whose contribution to educating the poor was outstanding," Books about educational and social history in our country rightly find space for her contribution in these areas. They speak of the schools she started, the system of education she established, the institutions she founded to help the needy and the unfortunate. Her troubles are mentioned only if some dramatic scandal is sought, and they suit that well, but her holiness and forbearance make poor secular drama. They are of interest mainly to those seeking to establish that she was a heroically holy woman.

Her forbearance was certainly of interest to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Just as you know that the tilers have done a good job on your roof only after a few cloudbursts and a hailstorm or two, so it is with heroic virtue. What the Church looks for in her saints can only be established when she sees how the holiness of a Servant of God has fared in the face of "the slings and arrows" of outrageous humanity.

But however significant they are, good works and patience and benevolence are not at the heart of holiness. The true heart of holiness was revealed by our Saviour when he was asked, "What is the first and greatest commandment of the Law?" "To love the Lord your God [he said] with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength and your whole mind". The second is like to it, and indeed dependent on it, to love your neighbour as yourself. As long as the sun shines, the light of the moon is secure. So, if we love God, genuine love of our neighbour is inevitable.

Mary MacKillop certainly loved her neighbour. At the tribunal investigating her life in the 1920s many questions were put to witnesses who had known her. Each was finally asked

what she remembered most vividly about the Foundress. Collusion was impossible. But each answered at once, "Her kindness, she was so kind." Some other Sisters who had been with Sister Mary in the early days were asked to write down their memories of her. One old Sister struggled through a page or so of big writing and then finished off: "I am sorry that I cannot relate other incidents completely except that our dear Mother was good humble charitable and kind to all." None of these Sisters was talking about the organized kindness of the Josephites - they meant Mother Mary's kindness in her personal dealings with people. If anyone had ever denied that, these people would have risen from their graves and joined the old bush schools and the slab huts and the very gum trees throughout Australia in a chorus of protest.

Here is one incident selected from many. Mary arrived one day at a country school at lunch time, after a tiring journey and only a cup of tea for breakfast. She asked the Sister at the convent to prepare something for her to eat while she visited the school. The Sister, who knew there was very little in the larder, did her best with what was there. She told the story years later:

Just as she was about to sit to the table a knock came to the door. I went to see who was there and a poor half-starved badly clothed old man stood before me. 'Would you give me a bit to eat, Miss', he said, 'I can get no work in this town, nor anything to eat. I am very weak.' Mother followed me to the door and when she saw the man, 'Sister dear,' she said, 'give to that poor creature what you have prepared for me. A cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter will be sufficient for me. Poor old man, perhaps some father that the world has been hard on'.

The Sister said: "This action is often present to me. I often think of dear Mother Mary and the poor old man of thirty odd years ago."

Mary's kindness was a reflection of her love of God. A priest who knew her well gave evidence at the tribunal:

My first impression was that she was wrapped up in God. As far as a human being could, she was in union with God. Each time I met her I was more impressed... An extraordinary person, so different from other people. Most spiritual person I had ever met. ... Her union with God was continuous. Her life was one prayer. Prayer, I am sure, helped her a lot.

Prayer was indeed, in a sense, Mary's normal state. After her few days at Paray-le-Monial, at the shrine of the Sacred Heart, she described herself as a natural contemplative called by God to a life of activity. She never relinquished her habit of contemplative prayer, as often as possible before Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. The Eucharist, Sacrifice and Sacrament, was the centre of her devotional life. If her health was particularly bad she indicated this by saying she was too ill to attend Mass.

Mary of the Cross neither denied her problems nor made a martyr of herself. Thus, late in life, she said of her handwriting: "it is not as easy to do as of old." The fact is, she was paralysed in the right hand and had bad rheumatism in the other. She talked about it as a matter of fact, like the weather, and only introduced the subject to apologise for her poor writing and her short letters. But she never made out that her crosses were "nothing". Her attitude at the end of her life was enshrined in something she wrote thirty-five years earlier:

My prayer was that I would not cease to implore his mercy for grace to do entirely his will only, no matter at what cost, when he would require it of me, but I could not from my heart then say that I did not feel it hard.

This is reflected perfectly in what she wrote to one Sister not long before her death:

As for my own health, dear child, my sufferings are increasing gradually, the nerves are giving me a great deal of trouble. I scarcely know any rest from them now at all. It is just seven years since the hand of God was laid so heavily upon me, and I often wonder how long more I shall be left in this weary world, but a thousand times welcome be his most holy will.

The Lord said, "Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it," Mary MacKillop's life was indeed blessed. Her life was one long response to God's word spoken in heart at an early age.

Canonization is the Church's response to the appeal of the faithful somewhere who are convinced that there has been a saint among them. It involves a long and toilsome procedure, the crucial moment being the proclamation that the Servant of God lived a life of heroic holiness. That is a human judgment, passed in the light of a "Position" put together from what was in Mary MacKillop's case a mountain of documentary evidence. But, as John Paul II liked to point out, divine endorsement is then sought in the form of two miracles, one before beatification, the other before canonisation.

The miracles usually concern recovery from physical illness, and the review of them is minute and exacting. Firstly, a diocesan tribunal investigates diagnosis, prognosis, therapy, and details of recovery. Then a "Position" constructed from the evidence is examined in Rome by a "medico-legal" board and then by a team of five medical specialists. They are asked whether they can explain the patient's history in the light of their scientific knowledge. If they find themselves unable to do this, the case passes to a team of theologians who examine how the intercession of the Servant of God has been invoked. The miracle proposed or Mary's canonization has passed through these stages - the medico-legal scrutiny, the medical board, and the theologians. It now awaits the verdict of a committee of cardinals and bishops before being sent to the pope.

Pope Benedict has more than once indicated that he awaits this moment eagerly. At World Youth Day last year he said:

One of the most outstanding figures in this country's history is Blessed Mary MacKillop. ... Her perseverance and her practical example of holiness have become a source of inspiration for all Australians.

He had stressed this importance of holiness among the faithful for the salvation of the world when he said in an address in honour of his patron Benedict at Subiaco: "Only through those who have been touched by God can God come near to mankind."

The intercession of the saints, and their example, have traditionally been precious elements in the life of the Church. This appears early on the walls of the catacombs where we read: "Peter and Paul, pray for us!" It is expressed in the first Preface for Holy Men and Women in the Roman Missal as we pray:

In their lives on earth you give us an example, in our communion with them you give us their friendship, in their prayer for the Church you give us strength and protection. This great company of witnesses spurs us on to victory.

Not a few Christians, including some Catholics, say that honour paid to the saints detracts from the honour due to the Creator, and that prayer should only be directed to God himself. I even had a letter from a priest telling me that I was wasting my time labouring at the Position all those years because saints went out with Vatican II. That would be startling piece of

misinformation coming from anybody, but a priest should surely have known better than that. The Council's Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* deals explicitly and at length with "the eschatological nature of the pilgrim Church and its union with the heavenly Church". In Chapter 7 we read:

In the lives of those who shared in our humanity and yet were transformed into especially successful images of Christ, God vividly manifests to men his presence and his face.

So far from abolishing the saints from our devotional life, the Council spoke of their cult and our union with them with great reverence and urgency. The second of the Prefaces for the saints refers to them as living witnesses of God's love and the living sign of his saving power. Without them we would have God's precious promises but no sign that he was fulfilling them in the life of his Church. "You are glorified in your saints (says the first Preface), for their glory is the crowning of your gifts." God's glory is the primary goal of the proclamation of saints, and their example and intercession help us to join them in achieving it.

There are three characteristics of Mother Mary of the Cross I think we might well pray to be able to imitate. They are: her faith, her endurance of the Cross, and her kindness. She will not be surprised or scandalized at our prayers, as she was herself in constant converse with the Mother of God and her favourite saints. These were many, but special among them were St Joseph, the patron of her Institute, and St Teresa of Avila, a kindred spirit.

We might leave her with two memories of her last days. After her stroke in 1902 her Jesuit brother Donald reflected with her on the divine graces she had received:

Mary of the Cross! What a glorious name, my sister. How true, too, in your eventful life.

Seven years later, a few weeks before her death, he had even more cause to recall the fulfilment of her prophetic title:

Mary of the Cross for forty years and more, aye and long before! Surely the God of love will be kind to you!

From the time she assumed that title, "Mary of the Cross" was the way Mary MacKillop always signed her name.

During these final years she was not a retired saint, she was a saint at her best. That she seemed to be "doing" nothing was irrelevant, because the soul of sainthood was alive in her - she was embracing God's will in the most difficult conditions.

That reference to God's will prompts me to end with a beginning - the beginning of the Papal decree declaring Mary of the Cross fit to be canonised. It is a quotation from one of her letters:

To me the will of God is a dear book which I am never tired of reading, which has always some new charm for me. I cannot tell you what a beautiful thing the will of God seems to me.