

Saint Mary MacKillop

Born January 15, 1842, in Australia | Died August 8, 1909, in Australia Canonized October 17, 2010 |

Feast Day: August 8

Mary's Radical Gift

Mary MacKillop was excommunicated for insubordination, and later she was told to move her congregation out of a diocese. Through it all, she showed a radical trust in God and the Church, even when some of its leaders were less than Christlike.

Mary's World

When Mary was born, Australia consisted of six colonies with a total population of around three hundred thousand. While gold had been found earlier on the continent, discoveries in 1861 in New South Wales and Victoria prompted large population influxes, bringing the number of Australians to more than 4 million by the end of Mary's life. On January 1, 1901, the colonies formed the Australian Commonwealth.

Mary's Path to Holiness

Faith and trust in God were about the only things that ever seemed to come easily to this daughter of Scots immigrants to Australia, who would be known as Mary of the Cross in religious life. One of the many things that always came hard was money, and so the MacKillop children—Mary was the oldest of eight, seven of whom lived past their first birthday—periodically were farmed out to other relatives. When she was sixteen, Mary went to work at a Melbourne stationery store, and with her brother John, she took on most of the financial responsibility for the family.

Two years later, Mary moved to the private town of Penola to serve as a governess to some of her cousins; an aunt and uncle had been the area's first European settlers and had done quite well for themselves compared with the MacKillops' hardscrabble existence. It was in Penola that Mary met Fr. Julian Tenison Woods, who was under

pressure from his bishop to provide a Catholic education for area children. He became Mary's spiritual director, and the two talked about establishing a community of women religious. However, in the meantime, Mary had taken a teaching position about a hundred miles away, and her family had joined her there.

Growing more desperate after a couple laywomen he had hired for the school both left, Fr. Woods again reached out to Mary. While she felt she couldn't leave her family since she was their main financial support, her younger sister agreed to fill in. Classes were held in the local church until Mary's brother John managed to fix up an unused stable.

In 1866, Mary returned to Penola. By later that year, she, one of her sisters, and some companions began forming a religious community with Fr. Woods's help. Father Woods was moved up the coast nearly 250 miles to Adelaide a year later, where he faced the same educational challenges. Mary and the others agreed to join him. Fr. Woods wrote the Sisters of St. Joseph community's rule (see below for a summary of the Sisters of St. Joseph Community Rule), and Bishop Laurence Sheil approved it in late 1868. Within a year, the "Brown Joeys," as they were known because of their habits, were in charge of nearly two dozen schools, a women's shelter, and an orphanage.

But trouble was ahead. Mary and three other sisters moved to Queensland at the invitation of Brisbane's bishop. Severe disagreements ensued over control of the schools—Mary believed it belonged with the sisters; the bishop believed control rested with the diocese.

A resentful priest's complaints about the sisters and his view that they needed to be under diocesan control found their way to Bishop Sheil, the same bishop who had approved the community's original rule. Back in Adelaide, on September 22, 1871, after receiving a letter from Mary stating her desire to continue to operate the community according to that rule, Bishop Sheil excommunicated her and evicted the sisters from their residence. On his deathbed the following March, the bishop ordered her excommunication rescinded.

Intent on moving the community beyond diocesan politics, Mary left Adelaide in March 1873 and did not return until January 1875. When she met with Pope Pius IX in Rome, her first stop, he called her “the excommunicated one.” After traveling throughout Europe, Mary was called back to Rome and accepted a revised constitution.

Back home in Australia, Mary continued to encounter opposition from the bishops, who believed they needed more control over the sisters. This round of discord included the bishop of Adelaide, who in November 1883 sent Mary to Sidney. It is perhaps not surprising that Mary was removed as superior general in favor of a more pliable sister. Mary served as her assistant superior general, but the pair failed to see eye to eye on many topics. To add to Mary’s challenges, Fr. Woods died in 1889; their relationship had never been completely repaired.

When the superior general died, the sisters returned Mary to that role, a position she would hold until her death. A stroke in 1902 confined her to a wheelchair but had no other effects on her abilities. Indeed, she was elected to another term as superior general three years later.

Sayings of the Saint

- Whatever troubles may be before you, accept them bravely, remembering Whom you are trying to follow. Do not be afraid. Love one another, bear with one another, and let charity guide you all your life. God will reward you as only He can.
- Find happiness in making others happy.
- Be eager in your desires but humbly patient in their accomplishment.
- Believe in the whisperings of God to your own heart.
- Let us all resign ourselves into His hands, and pray that in all things He may guide us to do His Holy Will ... When thoughts of this or that come I turn to Him and say: "Only what you will, my God. Use me as You will".
- Remember we are all but travelers here.

The Rule (Constitution) of the Sisters of St. Joseph

The Sisters' principal mission was the education of children whose parents [were] in humble circumstances, but that they must also reach out to orphans and destitute persons. How? By being poor and humble and considering [themselves] the least among all religious orders; giving themselves wholly to God; living in houses which were absolutely without revenue and [deriving] their support from either the Schools, the Institutions over which [they had] charge, or from alms. These houses were to be very poor with fittings such as poor people used. Likewise, their habits were to be made of the cheapest brown material available.[2]

They were to take four vows, poverty, chastity and obedience and one to do all in their power to promote the love of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the hearts of little children. Those sisters engaged in teaching were to: ***“take every pains [sic], leaving nothing untried as a matter of justice to the parents, that the children [might] progress in worldly learning. ... No matter, therefore, how tiresome, or how tedious it [might be], or how difficult, they [were to] patiently use every effort to make the children learn and see that they [understood] what they [learn]”***

In community the Sisters were to make a constant effort to

“lighten each other's burdens, especially those of the old and feeble, striving to make each one's infirmities their own by their sympathy and kindness.”

One of the strongest concluding statements read that Sisters must

“do all the good they can, and never see an evil without trying how they may remedy it, and thus to take a most lively interest in every external work of charity in the gaols, poor-houses, and hospitals, so as to leave nothing untried, no matter how difficult, provided it may advance the glory of God, the good of souls, and the prevention of

sin In the world. This is their mission, for though the Institute has its peculiar [particular] duties, yet the religious must do any good that they can and make their charity all-embracing. Let them, therefore, like our Blessed Lord, reject no one.[5]”

Praying with St. Mary MacKillop

St. Mary, help me to put aside my temptation and desire to be “popular” especially when it conflicts with God’s call. Help me to trust and to believe that being popular with God is all that matters.