

Mother Mary MacKillop 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
St Mary's Cathedral, 8 August 2009

Ten days ago I travelled to Brisbane to participate in the celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Archdiocese of Brisbane. The homily at the Mass was given by Archbishop Dairmiud Martin, the current Archbishop of Dublin. He related how the first Archbishop of Brisbane had previously been a priest of the Archdiocese of Dublin, before his appointment to the responsibility which covered the whole of the newly established state of Queensland. It was the then Archbishop of Dublin, Cardinal Paul Cullen, who strongly supported the appointment of James Quinn as the first bishop. A nephew of the Cardinal was the later Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Francis Moran.

It is interesting to note that the Archdiocese of Hobart was founded seventeen years earlier, in 1842, the very year of the birth of Blessed Mary MacKillop. Interesting also, that the new bishop, James Quinn, would cause Blessed Mary considerable grief after he took up his role in the new diocese.

The life of Blessed Mary is, as we would expect, made up of a number of significant chapters – her early years as the eldest child in the MacKillop family, living in various locations in inner-city Melbourne; the commencement of her teaching career in the small South Australian town of Penola; the early beginnings of new congregation, and the difficulties with the Bishop of Adelaide, the initiative to formalise the constitution of the congregation through her visit to Rome; the period when she was not the Superior of the Congregation, and the final years when once again she was the Superior, but faced as well with a serious decline in her health, leading to her death on 8 August 1909. It is also interesting to note that Mary was only 67 years of age at the time of her death.

I was particularly keen to pursue a little more closely, the phase of Mary's life when she was out of office, in particular from 1885 to 1897. How did Mary cope with someone else having the leadership role in the congregation of which she herself was the founder? It would have been far from easy.

This difficult period in her life began because of the positive intervention of the Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Francis Moran. He believed that the constitutions were not being observed, in terms of the leadership appointments,

and as a result, steps were taken to find a replacement, and that was Mother Bernadette Walsh.

Fourteen very challenging years faced Blessed Mary, but to her credit, she came through them in a most commendable manner. Sr Bernadette found it harder to make decisions; and she did not have the same level of concern for the needs of the individual sisters as Mary had already displayed. At times it seemed as if the very survival of the Congregation was at issue.

As her biographer, Paul Gardiner says,

*“Seeing as plainly as anyone that things were not going well, Mary was confronted with a personal dilemma. It would have been relatively easy to withdraw, to give up, to preserve an absolute silence, to be uncritical and to allow the situation to deteriorate unchecked. The temptation to do this could have been based on the idea that the foundress, being no longer Superior, could thereby give an admirable example of self-abnegation and humility by her “non-interference” with the decisions of her successor. But was this the course dictated by prudence? Moreover, was it true obedience and could she reconcile it with her duty as Assistant General. Above all was it charity?”<sup>1</sup>*

As the author concludes, Mary did her best to assist the Mother General, and to encourage the Sisters to be faithful to their Rule, and to respect the one placed over them.<sup>2</sup> It was a very commendable approach in her part. It has been noted that Mary was honest by disposition, and ready to speak directly and clearly. It would appear that she was not looking to be re-instated as the Mother General, but that is what happened in 1898.

There can be no doubt that Mary followed very closely the encouragement that St. Paul gave to the Colossians, to be clothed in compassion, in generosity and humility, gentleness and patience, ready to put up with the short-comings of others and to let the power of God come through to resolve the situation at all times.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary MacKillop by Paul Gardiner SJ, page 430

<sup>2</sup> Idem, page 431

Many others have noted her depth of trust in God, her readiness to forgive and her constant effort to stay in touch with all of her Sisters as regularly as she could. It is no surprise that the particular passage we have just heard has been chosen for the Liturgy of the Word. Trust in God was a hall-mark of her spirituality and her conduct.

Today is a precious opportunity for the Church in Australia and New Zealand to give thanks for the wonderful leadership, courage and dedication of Mary, which has been so successfully translated into the ethos, spirituality and traditions of her subsequent followers in the various Josephite Congregations in Australia.

History tells us that Mary had her issues with a number of bishops, beginning with Bishop Shiel, the Bishop of Adelaide, and the Quinn brothers, James in Brisbane and Matthew in Bathurst. It would appear that her relationship with Cardinal Moran, the Archbishop of Sydney was difficult at times, although he did acknowledge at a very early stage that Mary was a person of exceptional sanctity.

Now, as you know, the Bishops of Australia meet twice yearly at the Josephite centre in North Sydney. Two of the bishops regularly actually occupy the accommodation on the first floor above the room where Mary died 100 years ago today. On a daily basis, bishops move over to spend a few moments in prayer at the tomb of Mary, myself included. It is a complete change from the situation that prevailed for so much of her life. For that too, we can be thankful.