

THE MacKILLOP PROVOCATION

THE CANONISATION of Mary MacKillop is a powerful and very public assertion of Christian faith and Catholic beliefs. It is a big event for Christianity in Australia. Predictably, it is provoking a deal of heated criticism. We Catholics seem to have a special knack for stirring the cultural pot. How good or bad is that, I wonder? Possibly a bit of both.

Mary MacKillop was a person who lived by very Australian values. She was a woman who supported the poor and underprivileged, one of the common people, a woman who displayed great fortitude in face of ill-treatment by authority. She is a person that all Australians can appreciate.

But it is a very Catholic thing to have her canonised and that does not go down well with many of our fellow-citizens. Catholics have been accused of exploiting her.

In declaring her to be a saint, it is objected, we Catholics are publicly declaring our 'peculiar' beliefs in holiness, in life after death, in heaven, in miracles, in the power of prayer. The very fact that people in our enlightened twenty-first century Australia should hang on to such beliefs is an embarrassment to many. 'What century are we in?' it is asked in disgust.

If we Catholics would only keep these beliefs to ourselves we would be tolerated and left alone. But we insist on flaunting them in public. Such public display raises the hackles of many of our fellow Australians and provokes a latent anti-Catholic feeling into the open.

Not that opposition troubles us much; we are fairly hardened to it, having been served up with plenty of it down the generations.

But there is a difference in this present-day anti-Catholic feeling. No longer is it, as it

often was in earlier days, an expression of sectarianism—opposition to one Church from other Churches. The ecumenical movement has instilled mutual respect among the Churches in Australia.

Anti-Catholicism now finds its source deep within the general Australian culture. What we Catholics are so publicly banging on about contradicts much of what passes for commonsense and wisdom in Australia today.

Hence the canonisation of Mary MacKillop and all that the event encapsulates is a provocation, an in-your-face celebration of beliefs that do not fit comfortably in contemporary Australia, and which seriously annoy many people. One has only to keep an eye on the columns and comments in *The Sydney Morning Herald* to see ample evidence of the fact.

But there is more behind present-day anti-Catholicism in Australia, as I realized when I did my national duty and lined up to vote on election day in the grounds of the local public school.

A little ahead of me in the line was a fellow in his late 40s who was launched on a long statement of his views on the Catholic Church and Catholics generally. I don't know what started him off because I only noticed what was going on when he was already in full flight. But I got the jist of his story and something of his grievances fairly quickly.

He had been baptised a Catholic, made his first Communion, been Confirmed—the lot! He felt he had had a bad time in the Catholic boarding school to which his parents sent him. Now he is an atheist, he declared—specifically an anti-Catholic atheist, I gathered. He was listing all the things he did not like about Catholics and the way we operate.

From my place down the line I proffered him my quizzical half-smile that I use for such

occasions, to let him know that his voice was carrying.

Then he started on doctrine—the things ‘they’ ask you to believe on faith, unquestioning faith. Such as: there is one God...but there are three of them!

Since he was now moving into the area of my specialty—theology—I could contain myself no longer. ‘Well ...not quite!’ I interrupted. Then I identified myself: ‘I am the local parish priest.’

I gave him a moment to register that fact, then proceeded to a summary explanation, citing Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, of the tantalizing insights we can have into the mystery of mysteries, the life of the Trinity.

Not bad, considering this was all happening in the public school yard!

It was an amicable enough exchange. I acknowledged that he seemed to have had a bad boarding school experience. On the other hand, I told him, I had had a very good time in an equivalent institution (the ‘Apostolic School’, our MSC minor seminary).

At the conclusion he said I was ‘O.K.’—by which I understood that I was all right even if a Catholic priest.

At least some of the contemporary anti-Catholic *animus* in Australia is attributable to the ‘ex’ factor, the once-were-Catholics and the baggage they carry. How many, I wonder, of the more vocal critics are former Catholics now venting their feelings about the Church they have walked away from?

We can acknowledge such feelings with a fair degree of sympathy and understanding, and we must recognize that the Catholic Church can be a disappointingly human community that de-

mands a lot of patience and acceptance from us all especially in recent times, even if the hurts being carried by these former Catholics cause them to lash out inappropriately.

All-in-all, the Canonisation and all the attention it is receiving is valuable for causing the Catholic voice to be heard in Australia. It is a voice that speaks of different things, transcendent realities, human possibilities with the grace of God, the communion of saints where we belong. Mary MacKillop’s story offers many lessons on life as it should be lived. It is a rich time for Catholics in Australia. It makes us stand out as different, like us or loathe us. It is far better than being ignored.

In his recent book *Losing My Religion. Unbelief in Australia*, (UNSW Press, 2009) Tom Frame claims that Australians are disinterested in religion, rather than indifferent to it. He writes:

Religion is not ignored wilfully or otherwise; it just doesn’t mean much to a great many people. In my judgment, the culturally compliant strain of Christianity promoted in Australia does not compel people to grapple with ideas that will expand their horizons, nor does it oblige them to embrace lifestyle choices that might involve discomfort. Much of what purports to be Christianity in this country is a form of religious therapy whose aim is to make people feel better about themselves or help them gain more enjoyment out of life. (p.15)

Thanks to the canonisation of Mary MacKillop, we Catholics cannot be accused of being ‘culturally compliant’—at least, not at the moment.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor.

An old Sister who knew her well said: ‘From the first time I met Mother Mary, she greatly impressed me, for her manner was most lovable and courteous ... No matter how busy she was, she always found time to comfort all who came to her with difficulties or in distress. Her love of the poor, especially poor children, was wonderful ...’

—<http://www.catholicaustralia.com.au/page.php?pg=prayer-marymckillop>