

# SAINT MARY OF THE CROSS

*Homily During the Thanksgiving Mass for the Canonization of St. Mary of the Cross, Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, Rome, 18 Oct. 2010.*

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**B**ROTHERS AND SISTERS in Christ. Fellow citizens of Australia. Yesterday Mary MacKillop was canonized at St. Peter's Basilica here in Rome by Pope Benedict XVI as Saint Mary of the Cross, the first Australian-born saint in the two thousand year history of the Catholic Church. We are delighted and grateful.

The Australia of today which welcomes this canonization is very different from the separate British colonies where Mary spent most of her life before the Commonwealth of Australia was established in 1901. In most ways Australia is now a better society, due to the wisdom and hard work of our predecessors, women and men like Sister Mary. The Australia which was and is Protestant or irreligious has made room for Catholics and we are grateful for this too.

My second greeting this morning 'Fellow citizens of Australia' (and I apologize to those non-Australians present, who are certainly included in the 'brothers and sisters in Christ') is taken from the final address of another great and earlier Australian, described on his tombstone in Scotland as 'The father of Australia'.

Major General Lachlan Macquarie came to the colony of New South Wales as governor 200 years ago in 1810 to restore order after the New South Wales Corps, the 'Rum Corps', had overthrown William Bligh the previous governor. It was then only twenty two years since the First Fleet had arrived in 1788, comprising about 1000 convicts and soldiers.

Many of the convicts were Irish Catholics, who were flogged if they did not attend the Protestant service on Sunday and had no freedom to practise their religion. Their numbers and sometimes their demeanour made official-

dom uneasy. Although Macquarie laid the foundation stone for the first St. Mary's Church in Sydney in 1821, for most of the colony's first thirty years the public celebration of Mass was forbidden. Indeed on becoming governor Macquarie was obliged to swear on oath that he did not believe in the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation! It was only in 1829 that the Irish statesman Daniel O'Connell achieved Catholic emancipation through the British parliament after a long campaign of peaceful mass protests.

Macquarie was the first public champion to the outside world of what he called Australia, not New Holland or even New South Wales. He was determined to change a convict colony into a free society, the beginnings of a nation and he built fine buildings, founded new towns, crossed the Blue Mountains, encouraged education for Europeans and for the aborigines also. But most importantly he insisted that reformed convicts, the emancipists should be accepted into society and he encouraged their children and the children of the free settlers, the 'currency lads and lasses', taller than their parents, outspoken sometimes, regularly determined, confident and occasionally irreverent. Many Australians today still like to think of themselves in these terms.

Mary MacKillop was born in the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy in 1842, the child of free settlers, some decades after Macquarie, and before the discovery of gold turned the colony upside down, bringing hundreds of thousands of immigrants seeking their fortune. But we believe that she shared the best characteristics of the currency lads and lasses as she exploited the openness of society which Macquarie encouraged, struggled to spread

education and battled quietly and effectively to combat the Catholic versus Protestant antagonisms, the sectarianism which waxed and waned until the middle of the twentieth century. She, however, suffered more from her fellow Catholics than from outsiders.

Saint Mary worked to give poor Catholics the capacity to exploit their opportunities, to avail themselves of the consequences of the widespread Australian conviction, which Macquarie favoured, that everyone had a right to a 'fair go'. Many young Australians when she opened her first school in Penola in 1866 did not want to go to school and their parents were not too disturbed by this. Mary wanted them to know the three 'rs' of reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic but she also wanted them to know of God's love for them and for 'the Word of Christ, in all its richness, to find a home' in them.

Two quotations from her writings help explain her life's work. Her sisters as St. Joseph's true children were to 'seek first the poorest, most neglected parts of God's vineyard', while probably her most famous exhortation was that the sisters were 'never (to) see an evil without trying to discover how they remedy it'. I hope and pray that this injunction sinks into the subconscious of all young Australians.

Mary of course became a nun, the founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart, a religious, devoted explicitly to the evangelical counsels, to being and living in faith, hope and love as an Australian. When presenting her rule to Rome for approval, she explained in an accompanying letter that 'It is an Australian who writes this, one brought up in the midst of many of the evils she tries to describe'. She stressed to Rome that 'what would seem much out of place in Europe is still the very reverse in Australia'.

We thank God today for the contribution of all the women religious to the Catholic story 'Down-under', not merely the hundreds of young Australian and Irish women who joined the sisters of St. Joseph, but all the religious who have labored for our benefit, served with



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'generosity and humility, gentleness and patience' to bring goodness and Godliness into the empty spaces of our vast continent.

Unlike some of Australia's best known humanitarians such as Fred Hollows or Weary Dunlop, Mary's life was centered on God. She realized that she was one of those 'chosen of God, the holy people whom he loves' and she wrote 'I want with all my heart to be what God wants me to be', to do only God's will and never to stand in God's way. Whatever she did, she did in the name of the Lord Jesus and she set her heart first of all on God's kingdom and his saving justice. It was this faith which motivated her service and motivated the many women who joined her. 'Faith', she explained 'is the first essential if we are to cope' with life's difficulties.

Today we find strange the name she chose for her religious profession 'Mary of the Cross', which explains our preference for the title St. Mary MacKillop. We like to think of ourselves as positive and affirming and one temptation today in our materially comfortable lives is to downplay the evil and spiritual anguish around us, to soft pedal the costs of redemption and ignore the flaws in our own hearts, the personal consequences of original sin. We are not born bad and depraved, but we are born selfish and imperfect. Nineteenth century Catholicism understood all this better than we do.

Mary did not like suffering and did not go looking for trouble. Her title 'Mary of the Cross' was for her a happy one, which acknowledged the afflictions of daily life. She

claimed ruefully ‘the little crosses of everyday life are harder to bear than the thumping big ones’. But she was given a number of thumping big crosses.

She was excommunicated by Bishop Sheil, a foolish and arrogant man, who let himself be misled by priestly lies. She was slandered, saw her sisters divided, suffered unjustly in a second enquiry and had to endure the estrangement, despite her best efforts, of the co-founder Father Julian Tenison Woods. Not surprisingly she turned to the Pope for help and protection and Pope Pius IX did not disappoint her.

Pius IX was pope from 1846-1878, the longest reign in history, surpassing even the twenty-five years traditionally assigned to St. Peter. During this period the Church was often under ferocious ideological attack and lost political control of the Papal States through military action.

The Pope was strict and not much given to conciliation, calling the First Vatican Council which defined Papal infallibility. But he presided over a period of remarkable expansion and renewal in Catholic life and devotion, which occurred also in Australia. The Sisters of St. Joseph were only one of a number of new religious orders from the nineteenth century which flourished.

Pope Pius IX recognized that the finger of God was upon the young, once excommunicated Sister Mary of the Cross. He understood her faith, idealism and potential. He supported her and we have benefited immensely.

In Australian terms we would now say that in Mary MacKillop the Holy Father backed a winner!

In these circumstances, we recognize her most remarkable virtue which was the capacity to forgive. She made her own Paul’s instructions to the Colossians which we have heard today: ‘The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same’.

We are told that John Kennedy the American president said ‘forgive your enemies but never forget their names’, while much earlier the great Protestant queen of England, Eliza-

beth I is alleged to have recommended burying the hatchet, but ‘don’t forget where you buried it’.

Sister Mary of the Cross belonged to a different school. During the months of her excommunication, which she knew to be invalid, she wrote ‘I have, through God’s wise permission at present enemies...but they are loved enemies’. Nearly twenty years later she told her sisters that ‘when you become hard, suspicious and censorious, then goodbye to being children of St. Joseph’. Over the years she practised what she preached. She felt the ‘force of God’s immense love and patient mercy’ despite her own ‘poor and cold spirit’ and told of her own return to equilibrium ‘a quiet and slow healing process, rediscovering a calm after the storm which had been (her) life for the past few years’. She truly said good bye to her old scores.

St. Mary of the Cross was kind and commonsensical. She told her sisters to expect crosses and realize that ‘we also give them’ and encouraged them to have patience with their own failures, to bear with the faulty ‘as you hope God will bear with you’. She regularly dispensed good Christian advice.

We thank God for the life, wisdom and contribution of St. Mary of the Cross. We are grateful that she was not eccentric, not religiously exotic. We warm to her advice, are encouraged by her perseverance in sickness and adversity. Her faith and moral goodness are heroic, but not in a way which is off putting or surreal. She does not deter us from struggling to follow her.

From the earliest days of European settlement Christianity and its Catholic component has been one of the most important rivers watering and nourishing Australian life. In yesterday’s Papal ceremony the universal Church put its seal on the outstanding Catholic contributor in Australian history. By its approval majority Australia now acknowledges that Godliness, Christian virtue and Catholic service have a well deserved place in the pantheon of Australian achievements.

This canonization is an occasion for Catholic rejoicing and an occasion too for Australians to rejoice in a job well done. St. Mary of the Cross is one of us, a child of the free and open society that Macquarie created, who made use of all the opportunities that such a society gives to bring God's love and help to others. Her voice is an Australian voice, the voice of a great woman all Australians can recognize as one of their own. But her example and teachings—about for-

giveness, about resisting hardness of heart, and about working to overcome evil, refusing to be disheartened or defeated by it—speak to women and men well beyond our shores and in all ages. Australia is not a perfect place, but the blessings God has bestowed upon us have been blessings in abundance. Now he has raised up from among us St. Mary of the Cross as our first saint. May we be blessed with many more to come and many more like her

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*'Remember who your teachers were—from these you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus'. For many years countless young people throughout Australia have been blessed with teachers who were inspired by the courageous and saintly example of zeal, perseverance and prayer of Mother Mary MacKillop. She dedicated herself as a young woman to the education of the poor in the difficult and demanding terrain of rural Australia, inspiring other women to join her in the first women's community of religious sisters of that country. She attended to the needs of each young person entrusted to her, without regard for station or wealth, providing both intellectual and spiritual formation. Despite many challenges, her prayers to St Joseph and her unflagging devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, to whom she dedicated her new congregation, gave this holy woman the graces needed to remain faithful to God and to the Church. Through her intercession, may her followers today continue to serve God and the Church with faith and humility!*

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*Dear brothers and sisters, let us thank the Lord for the gift of holiness that is resplendent in the Church and today shines out on the faces of these brothers and sisters of ours. Jesus also invites each one of us to follow him in order to inherit eternal life. Let us allow ourselves to be attracted by these luminous examples and to be guided by their teaching, so that our life may be a canticle of praise to God. May the Virgin Mary and the intercession of the six new Saints whom we joyfully venerate today obtain this for us. Amen.*

*—From the Homily of Pope Benedict during the Mass of Canonization of Saint Mary of the Cross and five other saints.*