

THE CANONIZATION AND ROME PILGRIMAGE

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IT IS PERHAPS a *cliché*, but to describe the experience of attending the Canonization of Blessed Mary MacKillop in Rome on 17th October for me was the trip and experience of a lifetime!

From early adolescence I have held a burning passion to visit the heart of the Christian world, the great cathedrals and galleries of Europe, and in particular England for ancestry reasons. I expect that everyone's first visit taking in the sights of Rome, including the sheer size of St Peter's Basilica and Square makes a massive impact. Being there for the occasion of the canonization of the first Australian born saint made it an additionally significant and overwhelmingly exciting occasion for me.

Growing up in the Sandhurst Diocese, my education and parish life was shaped by Irish orders of Brigidine Sisters and Augustinian Priests. I had not heard of Mary MacKillop until, as a graduate teacher, my first position was teaching Year One at a Josephite school in far flung Kununurra in the remote East Kimberley region of Western Australia. It was in this year that I developed a deep respect and passion for the charism and spirit of Mary MacKillop and the contribution of the Sisters of St Joseph to Catholic education in Australia.

Most Wednesday evenings I attended a small gathering to celebrate Mass at the convent, where in the centre of the lounge room wall hung the well known portrait of a young Mary MacKillop before entering religious life, green dress, hair in plats rugged Australian landscape as background. Nearly twenty years on this image has remained with me as the Australian woman who so passionately battled the challenges and obstacles she encountered

in delivering a Catholic education for all who requested it in uniquely Australian conditions.

Since my devotion to Mary MacKillop began in Kununurra two decades ago, my wife, two sons and I have journeyed to some Australian places of MacKillop pilgrimage, including the western district trail to the first school in Penola and Fr Wood's Parish Church, as well as several visits to the Mount Street Chapel in North Sydney to pray at the tomb of Mary MacKillop. Both of these Australian sites I would like to visit again. The experience of being in Rome and witnessing Pope Benedict formally recognise Mary MacKillop as a saint of the universal church, for me is the most sacred of pilgrim experiences and in every way was as overwhelming and special as I imagined.

The only vague comparison I can draw, in attempting to capture the emotion of witnessing the canonization Mass, is that of attending several ANZAC dawn services at the St Kilda Road Shrine. Beginning in the still darkness, we cued from 6:30 a.m. and stood excitedly and patiently as dawn broke over Rome and the cool light of day gently began to illuminate the massive dome of St Peter's Basilica.

After passing security and gaining access to the public gallery, we were thrilled at the good fortune of not only having seating, but to be in the front row parallel to the large portrait of MacKillop that hung on the façade of the Basilica.

As the crowd grew, and skyline changed from dramatically dark to cobalt blue, the piazza swelled to a sea of faces with many Australian and the odd Kiwi flag proudly waving throughout the crowd. It was moving to see the various banners proudly depicting the

names of parishes from around Australia, other pilgrims who had travelled so far to share in this momentous occasion in both the life of the Church and history of Australia.

What followed was a succession of goose bump moments as I attempted to comprehend the historical significance and truly once in a lifetime of what I was experiencing. Seated amongst the dignitaries in the steps in front of us were Kevin Rudd and Julie Bishop, both of whom responded to our waving and chanting, returning smiles and waves!

The two and a half hours of the Mass passed reasonably quickly as something of the life and work of each of the six candidates for canonisation was told in their mother tongue. There were joyous cheers and clapping as Sisters of St Joseph, wearing distinctive blue scarves, processed to the altar to undertake various roles during the Mass.

This truly was a significant experience in my life, and something that has become part of me and I believe I will remember for my lifetime, certainly with the prompting of many photographs taken to capture the many highlights and unique moments during this pilgrimage.

Other highlights included a day trip to Assisi, the preserved medieval city and birth and burial place of San Francesco and Santa Chiara. Visiting the Catacombs, the place of early Christian burial outside the walls of the old city of Rome during pagan rule, and tak-



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ing in the Vatican Museum and interior of St Peter's Basilica, the world's largest church.

A half day walking tour, following in the footsteps of Mary MacKillop in 1873; visiting various churches, chapels and gardens that were places of personal significance to her and referred to in her journal were also highlights of my time in Rome. It was this day that by chance we met Geraldine Doogue and an ABC film crew. She took the opportunity to interview a handful of Australians who had travelled to Rome for the canonisation. Much to my amazement, ten seconds of my interview was the first pilgrimage 'grab' aired on *Compass* on the evening of the canonisation!

In addition to Italy, I commenced my pilgrimage in London where I attended a high Mass at Westminster Cathedral, mother church of Catholicism in England and Wales and ended with a brief visit to Paris where I attended a morning Mass at *Sacré Coeur* Basilica before returning to Melbourne.

Holy God, source of all goodness, who show us in Blessed Mary MacKillop a woman of faith living by the power of the cross, teach us, we pray, to embrace what she pioneered, that like her we may show to the world new ways of living the gospel that respect and defend the human dignity of all in our land.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever.

—From the Prayer of the Church.