

## Mary MacKillop: On Pilgrimage

An ancient metaphor describing the spiritual life is that of *journey*. A journey can take many forms. One such form is that of pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a sacred journey and as such can be viewed on many levels, from the universal to the specific.

In this moment of time prior to Mary's canonisation we are all on pilgrimage with her. We journey together with the first Australian to be formally acknowledged as a saint, celebrating the culmination of a life that revealed the extraordinary in the ordinary. Mary MacKillop herself invites us to this journey. She reveals to us the innate God-possibilities in each of us and shows us that in the here and now, in this place and in this moment in time, we can meet the Incarnate God in our inner and our outer world. In doing so we move to that deep integration of the self God intends for all.

Mary's sacred journey took place on many levels: the geographical, the personal and social, and the religious and spiritual levels. It was a journey through suffering to peace.

The context of Mary's pilgrimage from the time of her birth was social and cultural change. Her pilgrimage began in Melbourne on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1842 and was completed in Sydney on the 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1909. Over her lifetime she saw the end of the convict era, the rise of public education, the movement from Christianity to secularism, the rise of the Irish Australian Church, federation and the preliminary international power struggles and revolutions which culminated in the First World War.

Her family experienced painful economic and social change because of Alexander MacKillop's poor judgement in his work. The resulting poverty forced Mary into early maturity. She gave emotional and financial support to her family, making mistakes and errors as she went but learning what it meant to be responsible for those too young and helpless to care for themselves.

The family moved from place to place as did Mary in her search for work and stability for her family. She finally came to Penola and there, together with Julian Tenison Woods, came to know the locus of her sacred calling: to be one with the poor and to work for their spiritual and social wholeness. While the work was located in a particular place and time Mary realised that the spirit of St. Joseph which inspired her was not restricted to a particular space or dimension.

Mary's family while financially unstable, nevertheless provided a faith-filled environment for her. Her mother had a loving trust in Providence and Mary herself possessed a compassion for those who were suffering. Her instinct was always to reach out and to lend a helping hand where needed. As a four year old Mary saw how tired her mother was and told Flora to lean on her. This instinct to reach out and help stayed with Mary all her life.

The men who constituted the hierarchy of the Church in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tested that faith in many ways. Her interaction with the hierarchy, and sometimes with the Catholic laity who saw the Josephites' begging as a scandal, forced her to walk the way of the Cross: a pilgrimage that would test her over and over again. Her experience taught her what it was like to be ostracised and banished. Rejection and abandonment by Church authorities, her own friends, and some Sisters taught her a trust in God and not just in the human. As she grew older her inner world expanded and she developed a depth of spirituality, a spirituality fed and nourished by Jesuit friends. Fr Clune, who knew her in later life, described her as a woman wrapped in God.

From the beginning the Sisters of St Joseph struggled for survival. They were a different type of religious group in a country that at one level tolerated difference but did not always understand it. This struggle for survival was the impetus that forced Mary to go to Rome in order to have her Institute blessed and recognised. She waited overseas for at least 18 months for the formal recognition of the Constitutions.

Mary MacKillop was gifted with the presence of God from an early age.

*[God] gave me a sense of His watchful presence that I could feel myself reprov'd for my smallest faults...He gave me a most keen sense of duty and in the discharge of what appeared to be my duty I felt it impossible to pause or consider my own feelings no matter how much they were trampled upon.*

It was a gift that never left her even though at times her human situation led her to the brink of depression. This God Presence apparently helped her focus her intention on the heart of her call. The result is that writers, such as James Cuskelly (*Walking the Way of Jesus*), see Mary as a pilgrim who becomes a model for Australians – walking the way of Jesus telling his truth and living his life.

Mary began her pilgrimage with an intention and a call. The intention was articulated fully until she was in her late teens. This happened when she realised the following:

...From the time I came to understand that [my father] had been intended for the Church and had not persevered, I began to desire that I could leave all I loved and live for God alone.

Mary's resolution was the deciding facet of a call personally hers. The lodestar in any change for Mary was the work she was called on to do for the Kingdom. Those who attempted to change her direction often opened spiritual doors for her, and became as her father was, her spiritual mentors.

*The whole of Mary MacKillop's life was a response to God's word spoken in her heart at an early age, a word that grew ever more demanding. Her personal virtues, all the works she took up, her tireless activity, was an expression of her concern to be faithful to the word of God.*

Her life pilgrimage is a challenge to all those seeking a deepening of the Spirit and who struggle to find meaning in their life: to recognise, as Mary did, the extraordinary in the ordinary. Her journey encourages fellow pilgrims to keep walking – the byways, the incorrect routes, life's deviations, but never to give up. She challenges us constantly to refocus on Christ, our compass, who will always show us 'true north' if we trust him as Mary did.

Mary's last spoken phrase was to her sister Annie who was praying with her. "Go on," Mary said. Those words are a metaphor for us who travel as Mary did. "Go on!" is the heritage she leaves behind. Even in death Mary spoke the extraordinary to those who listen. She speaks the same word to all who walk in pilgrimage to her grave at North Sydney and to the other sacred places where her spirit still resonates and who carry her words with them in their lives. What better phrase could there be for those who walk in her spirit, whoever and wherever they may be.

(Summary of chapter by Colleen O'Sullivan rsj in *Mary MacKillop: Inspiration for Today* Edited by Pauline Wicks rsj)