

## **The Story of Mary MacKillop**

On 15 January, 1842 Mary MacKillop was born of Scottish immigrant parents Alexander MacKillop and Flora MacDonald in Fitzroy Melbourne.

Mary was the eldest of eight children. She was well educated by her father who had spent some years studying for the priesthood in Rome and Scotland. Through his own choosing he decided not to continue to ordination. Due to Alexander's inability to hold down a permanent job, the family was often without a home of their own, depending on relatives and friends to assist where they could.

From the age of sixteen, Mary assumed financial responsibility for her family, as a governess, a clerk for Sands and Kenny and as a teacher in Portland. In 1866 greatly inspired by Fr Julian Woods, Mary opened the first St Joseph's school in a disused stable in Penola.

In 1867, Mary took her first vows in Adelaide. Bishop Sheil approved the Rule for the new Congregation of Sisters, the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. Other young women soon came to join her. Together they opened schools for the working-class children in the poorer parts of our cities and in the isolated towns and communities across the newly emerging colonies of Australia. With the help of the Sisters other centres of care were established such as orphanages, refuges and houses of Providence for the destitute, lonely and sick. Mary MacKillop brought hope and love to those considered least in the Australian colonies of this period.

Throughout her life, Mary faced many painful experiences including excommunication in September 1871. In 1883 the affairs of the Institute were investigated by Bishop Reynolds of Adelaide. False accusations were made and yet Mary believed that in the end all would be well.

Some of the Bishops of her time felt that the Congregation should be under the control of each local Bishop. In order to sustain a sense of unity and common purpose in mission, Mary envisioned a Congregation over which the Congregational Leader would have responsibility for the day to day affairs of the Congregation and the appointment of Sisters to their local communities. In fact, Rome had given approval to such a style of leadership for the Congregation.

This caused conflict with some of the Bishops. In Brisbane, it meant the withdrawal of the Sisters from the diocese. In Bathurst it led to the establishment of a diocesan form of the Sisters of St Joseph. In these difficult times Mary refused to attack those who undermined her work. She was ever ready to forgive those who had wronged her.

Throughout her life she suffered ill health. She died on 8 August, 1909 at Mount Street North Sydney where she is now buried. On 19 January 1995 she was beatified by Pope John Paul II in Sydney and on 17 October 2010 was canonised by Pope Benedict XVI in Rome.

Saint Mary MacKillop's holiness is marked by her deep love, her courage in the face of adversity, her willingness to forgive those who harmed her, her compassionate response to those who were in trouble and her constant trust in the God who walked the journey with her. One of her outstanding qualities was her strong leadership both within the Church and beyond.

The Cross was her constant companion, finding here the strength and courage to respond with hope and compassion to the many demands that being the Founder of a new Religious Institute demanded.

Her life continues to inspire people around the world in living faithfully the Gospel call to love.

Monica Cavanagh  
Congregational Leader Sisters of Saint Joseph.