

The Real Mary MacKillop

When I asked about what might be the angle that you wished for this talk tonight one of the options I received was **“Talk about the Real MMK ... not so much the saintly bits.”** One gets the impression that when we put forward people to be honoured with titles and in this case the **title of “saint”** that somehow we are in danger of losing the real person, the reality of the whole person. I can understand this as we often project what we want or imagine on to people that we put forward to be models for us. We do that with recognised Sports people, Nobel Peace Prize Winners and other famous achievers and performers especially if they are in the past and there is not much written evidence around. We come up with a kind of ‘superman’/superwoman. And so too over the centuries we have often projected a piety, and supernatural activities onto people that the community have put forward as “saints”. Many of you will remember from Mary MacKillop’s letters that she had a healthy scepticism of so-called “visionaries” when some of the sisters became involved in such. She would not I feel appreciate us projecting such activities onto her when we call her Saint.

The Catholic community of Australia has put her forward to be considered for the title of ‘Saint’ so that she continues to be an encouragement and **a sign of hope in our own lives. She is a sign of hope to us because we see how she developed what were HER natural qualities and how that made a significant difference to the lives of others she encountered. For me there are three significant characteristics that were particular to Mary’s nature. She believed**

In being ‘true to her heart’

In acting from a compassionate heart

In understanding life through the lens of a grateful heart.

Add another ingredient: -through faith in the presence of a loving God these three characteristics matured and were refined in life’s furnace of suffering, endurance, and adversity. (Out of darkness and struggle often comes new growth and life) She had the courage to remain singleminded about these three beliefs. She was many times fearful but she learnt that courage can rise with fear. **This was Real not a pious bit.** If MMK demonstrates anything at all it has got to be that we ALL have qualities in our nature and that we all have in ourselves everything we need to reconfigure our lives with meaning in a life-giving way.

Yes, it is important that **WE keep MMK real to us**, that we remember that it is in her ordinary life that she learnt how to develop her natural talents and gifts. What will assist us immensely are the loads of evidence of this in the thousands of letters that she wrote to family, friends, Bishops and Sisters. We have her work diary, photos, and after she died in 1909 memories and reflections of her written by those who knew her. This is far more than most of us have about our grandparents. The incidents I mention tonight are all taken from letters, her diary or reflections from those who knew her. Not from hagiography.

The following is a memory shared by Donald her brother who died in 1925. She seems to have liked animals. He tells of a pet calf that Mary had as a young girl called **Blorac**. At that time her father was trying his hand at farming and not by the way doing too well. However, as farmers would know there came the time to round up the calves for sale (possibly for the slaughter) and into the herd went Blorac. When Mary came home to find that Blorac had been sold she was desperate and knowing they had little money she rode her horse to her grandparents and with a lot of persuasion got the money from the grandfather to buy the calf back. I think we see here in the girl some of the

determination, courage and resourcefulness we later experience in the woman. She loved that calf and showed it *by fighting for its life*. No doubt it wasn't easy. We can imagine the argument and displeasure of her father. She was, however, being true to herself... **she had a compassionate heart – and she followed it with action.** It was her nature. She endeavoured to be faithful to this. **It was REAL.**

Here is an extract from a Mother Rose Columba Adams the superior of the English Dominican sisters who had recently arrived in North Adelaide in 1883. She wrote *'The Sisters of St. Joseph have all the poor schools. They are of native growth, very hardworking and live much like the Sisters of the Poor. I like their Mother General very much. She is a large-hearted woman. They do much good here in Adelaide and 'up country' where they go in twos and threes.'* **She is a large hearted woman.** This seems to be part of the real MMK. Some of us here probably have that as part of **our** nature and personality. **Large hearted. Givers and doers for others.** A heart that responds easily to others' pain and deprivation. This was certainly Mary.

There are so many stories that point to this compassion been part of her nature. I'll just share three that Sisters who knew her have shared. This story is from a young sister who was companioning MMK into the city and they were waiting for the tram by the post-office at the bottom of Mount St Nth Sydney. **A young woman came staggering** along the pathway and the young Sister was sure she was intoxicated and no-one was taking much notice of the woman. However, MMK's quick eye detected something more serious and mentioned that they should go and see if there was anything wrong. On reaching the woman they found she was very ill and she asked if they'd help her to get to the Chemist's. The three of them then went to the Chemist's where the woman was attended to and they waited until she felt better. This different way of looking at people, without condemnation but shrewd judgement obviously made a life-long impression on the young Sister. Sister Annette Henschke has a similar story of MMK's shrewd judgement of people. She told of a girl people called **'Scotch Bella'**. She came from Queensland. She had committed a murder. She dressed as a man for three years and worked on the roads. Nobody could do anything with her. She was sent to gaol in South Australia. Mother Mary as she was known then, got her out and she brought her to the Refuge. She was like a raving lunatic when they brought her there. But gradually Scotch Bella quietened down, was completely rehabilitated and lived a wholesome life. Another sister after Mary's death saw **her picture in a pawnshop** and went in to the shop to purchase it but was told it was not for sale. It seems the owner and his wife were immigrants and on the starvation line when MMK not only bought them food and clothing but found him a good position in a warehouse. And he said "we are not even Catholics". **Yes, I believe she was "large-hearted"**. Yes, MMK's REAL. It was in her nature to reach out with compassion and generosity to others deprived, abandoned, neglected or suffering in some way.. This was a way of life for her. .

Part and parcel of the 'large-heartedness' was also **developing the capacity to change things** so that people gained a sense of their dignity and the opportunity for a better quality of life. No wonder she was attracted deeply to the dream of Fr. Julian Tenison Woods who desired an education system for the working class and bush children in SA. Along with this primary goal of education Julian wrote in the first Rule for the Sisters *"Do all the good you can and never see an evil without trying to remedy it.* Although this was later edited out from the Approved Rule MMK and the Josephite Sisters of all brands embraced this mission like a motto. With this spirit in both Julian Woods and MMK it is no wonder that this partnership led to great achievements that made a significant difference to the lives of ordinary people in Australia and New Zealand In brief it led to the establishment of a

different Religious Order of Women for that time that could be mobile, resilient and not reflect the class consciousness of European Orders. They developed an elementary school system that was egalitarian = aimed at giving everyone 'a fair go'. These schools were anywhere they were needed- the bush, in mining towns, the isolated country places, Ports, industrial areas, city slums. This spirit 'do all the good you can' spilled over into establishing houses for the abandoned elderly, ex-prisoners, single women and babies, abandoned children and a system of feeding jobless men. This singleminded passion in MMK could be summed up when in 1900 she felt there was a threat that the Josephite Sisters might agree to teaching in Select Schools and she gathered as many as she could around her in Mount St and talked to them saying "**First and foremost we are for the poor and most neglected in God's Vineyard.**" You could say MMK was **by nature a doer and an achiever** and carried out things with a singleminded passion as I am sure many of you do.

And we know that for all of us in the achievement of our visions and dreams - **it costs**. . MMK had **the usual ups and downs of living and experienced disappointments, disillusion, betrayal, crippling sickness and loneliness** like many of us perhaps. She at times doubted herself and says to Donald her brother how close she was to giving it all up. Here is another extract from her diary while she was in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1874, after being in Rome to present the Constitutions: 12th Jan "*Went to see the Bishop, got permission to beg but little encouragement.*" Jan 14th: "*Was so tired last night I fairly broke down before Mrs Carmichael who got me some brandy. Became better but had a sad night. Cried myself to sleep. Was so weary of the struggle and felt so utterly alone. Could not pray only offered my weary heart's trials to my God.*" **Yes, staying true to her heart, cost her deeply.**

Disappointments and even betrayal came early in MMK life from her family experiences. One particularly difficult time for the MacKillop family of seven children was when Alexander MacKillop heard that a family friend was very sick in Scotland and decided of a sudden to visit him for a time, without telling his wife, Flora, that he had mortgaged the farm. He left the young family to fend for themselves for nearly a year and a half. Although Mary was educated in the early days by her father and had his passion for fairness, the whimsical side of her father left the family insecure and often on dire straits financially. Mary was giving her background to Monsignor Kirby in Rome in 1873 and wrote "**my life as a child was one of sorrows, my home when I had it, a most unhappy one.**" Later she talks too about two tragedies in her family that of her younger brother John who died a young man in Christchurch from a horse accident, and her mother who died in a ship wreck off the coast on her way from Melbourne to Sydney to assist Mary and the Sisters in a bazaar they were having. Mary, seemingly close to all her family, especially her mother, had her fair share of family loss and worries. . Add to this the fact that Mary had her fair share of health conditions and according to her diary she had days when she just couldn't get out of bed and had to cancel appointments and travel. She suffered severe migraines as a young woman, rheumatism in mid life, and a stroke in later life. In reading her letters you will quite often come across something about how sore her thumb was from arthritis and that she couldn't write any more. **Yes, MMK is real and suffered like the rest of us from life's complexities.**

MMK like us all found **significant personal friendships supportive and enriching in her life.** She was particularly close and often guided in her twenties by her friendship with Julian Woods. Later she had trusted friendships with a couple of the Sisters who were her Councillors and a noted one with Johanna Barr Smith a Presbyterian benefactor in S A . She developed too what we might call a number of close working relationships (trusted associations) with several priests and Bishops some of which she called Advisors. Like us all - she also **lost** some friendships and trusted colleagues the

most significant one being her friendship with Julian T Woods and wrote that it was a most painful experience and nothing seemed to bring about healing and reconciliation. There were no doubt faults and misunderstandings on both sides and they were never resolved satisfactorily. I think too her relationship with Sr Hyacinth Quinlan who stayed with Bishop Quinn to train the women he had recruited as Josephites was standoffish at best. It took her a long time if ever to understand things from Hyacinth's point of view. The lack of resolution of these differences in their relationship had consequences for the black and brown Josephite Sisters that followed down the century. I guess this is the case for the breakdown of our own relationships. It costs both **for the persons involved and the others affected by it. Well I think she sounds Real..**

What most of us have not experienced (but few of us may have in some way) are the **very public experiences she had of humiliation**, of discrediting her name in an undignified way, of stripping her of her integrity. The three major occasions are the Excommunication from the Catholic Church by Bishop Sheils in 1871, the Public Inquiry by Bishop Reynolds in 1883 with banishment from the Adelaide Diocese and the re-appointment of Mother Bernard as Mother General in 1897 by Rome on the advice of the Bishops instead of an election as stated in the Josephite Constitutions. In all these trials I believe she tried sincerely to stay **true to her heart**.

During her lifetime then MMK was **quite a controversial figure**. Some hailed her as a living saint, a kind good woman. Others saw her merely as a trouble maker in the Catholic Church. Some Bishops saw her as a courageous woman battling for those deprived and with a great trust in the providence of God. Other Bishops held a different view. Bishop James Quinn called her *'an ambitious, obstinate woman, a disobedient nun and a very troublesome woman. He declared to his priests that she 'bribed the authorities in Rome to agree with her and that she was a subversive influence in his diocese.'* Bishop Reynolds of Adelaide accused her of drunkenness and embezzling diocesan funds. *"You have done your best to keep me in the dark, to conceal the scandalous habits of some notwithstanding your promise of being 'open and candid with your dear father in Christ'. You-from whom I expected every assistance – did your best and still continue to do your best to your own ends to frustrate all my best efforts and intentions. You govern by party spirit and by clique. Hoodwink the Bishop – that is your motto. I am but too well aware of how you have violated religious poverty, how you have squandered (I will refrain from a stronger term) the means of the Diocese. I therefore notify you to prepare at once to leave for Sydney as you no longer have the confidence of the Sisterhood here.'* She was cleared of both the latter in a formal investigation into Bishop Reynolds Public Inquiry. The shock stayed with Mary for years. She wrote in a letter to Sr. Mechtilde Woods (niece of Fr Woods) that there was not a night in the next three years where she did not wake up with the sound of the Bishop's words ringing in her ears.

It is true that the Josephite Sisters ran up a rather large debt in SA largely due to the speed with which they responded to requests for schools and the travel the Sisters needed to make to their Mother House as many of them were Postulants/Novices and needed ongoing training. Added to this was the practice of 'begging' in order to sustain their lives and many priests felt that parishioners gave money to the Sisters that they'd normally give to the struggling Parish. Maybe MMK developed things too quickly without careful financial planning. She wrote in 1874 *"when I want something very much, I thank God beforehand for I feel God will certainly grant what He has been thanked for"!!* That attitude of *'do first and pay later'* may have led to overextension at times. Sr Monica Phillip's letter to Doctor Campbell in Scots College in April 1884 after the inquiry that included looking into debts of the Institute says *'Saints even have often been in trouble about money*

and the holiest of persons have not always been the best managers in business matters' suggests that Monica perhaps knew that business acumen wasn't Mary's strength. MMK was human she had limitations- **yes, I think she was very real.**

However none of the above, her personal generosity, her beginning a new Order of Religious Sisters, her establishing schools for the working class and country children, her providing places for the abandoned elderly and sick, her care for solo mothers and babies, her system of visitation to prisoners and her places for children on the street necessarily puts Mary in the category for the title of 'Saint'.

What is the truth of Mary MacKillop? What was her inner force? What motivated her, what sustained her? Why did the community soon after her death put forward her name as someone to be emulated as a saint? Why did Cardinal Moran on visiting her bedside in August 1909 say that he *'had just left the bedside of a Saint.'* The Causes of Saints commission had to sift through the evidence and come to a decision as to whether this woman exemplified **heroic Christian virtue**. They no doubt pondered **"How to account for the remarkable life and prodigious works of MMK? Can it be explained simply as a single-minded good woman who was generous, obstinate and determined beyond measure?"**

Or must we acknowledge that in her person and tireless toil there lay **a deep spiritual motive that gave her strength and sustained her throughout**. Was she lead by some consuming love that was ever present to her, that drove her, that sustained her that grieved her when it seemed absent. Did this love-of-her life lead her to heroic virtue and fortitude in adversity? **Yes, I believe so** ...echoing the scriptures she could say "I love God with my whole heart, my whole soul and all of my being and God loves me likewise". She believed she was enveloped in God's love. She was constantly on about the Will of God. - She **lived to do the Will of God**, a good God, a wonderful God who called her she ardently believed to spread that love, that compassion and healing, that liberation and justice with all those she encountered.

It seems fairly clear that she **developed a stance early in her life** that rested on **one simple belief** summed up in what she wrote in 1871. **"See the hand of God in all that happens not the caprice of others"** This imbued that part of her nature that believed there was a purpose for everything that happened. Some would suggest that she was a mystic. One writer defines a mystic as *"Someone who is constantly aware of the presence of the Divine within the mystery of the everyday life."* This presence of the Divine in the everyday appears to be a very real experience for Mary. . Writing to Father Woods in the early times she says **"I have such a presence of God. I may say that it never leaves me, it makes everything hard, easy. I just get a taste of bitterness in some things and then something calm raises my mind above it all. I feel this presence of God at all times- when talking to old friends, strangers, the Sisters, Priests. And again after a little struggle with something that I do not like to do. It makes me see God – God's will and God's immense mercy and love in everything."** Julian Tenison Woods would have been very much in tune with what she was expressing as he wrote in the Book of Instructions for the Sisters *"The presence of God does not consist in thinking of God but in a sense of God's presence in every occupation"*. **This is real for those with faith;** We have all experienced the presence of the Divine in a moment of pure calm, in a sunset, in beauty, in loss, in a struggle, in a look of love, a surprise. What is saintly here is that **MMK worked hard to keep that belief in the presence of God close to her. She always thought of God in**

positive terms such as ‘my Good God, Our Wonderful God, our Provident God’ She engenders hope for us to struggle on too trying to make meaning out of what happens to us.

We see that struggle from a letter she wrote to Donald whom she confided in more than anyone else. This is in 1897 and Mother Bernard has been the MG for the last 12 years and MMK and many of the sisters are hoping that there will be an election as the Constitutions state. However, on the recommendation of the Bishops, Rome once again agrees to reappoint Mother Bernard without an election.

“I am so sorry for all the anxiety you must have had from my last letter. I suppose when I told you of the horrible temptations I had in the past I should have told you more, and this would have saved you some anxiety. Excepting that I lost my temper with MG(Mother Bernard) on one particular occasion which I shall ever regret for I forgot what I owed to her in her position. I really did resist the temptations against submission and my vocation though they were awful while they lasted.

Often smarting under insults and misrepresentations which I longed to resent, I would have to go and do the ‘dirty work’ as many call it, simply because I could not resist God’s pleading voice or look. Ah God was good to me. I see it all now more plainly than ever.

“I am truly sorry that the Cardinal has done this, as unknowingly he has done our poor Institute a great wrong. He simply does not know the utter unfitness of Mother Bernard for the position of leading the Institute. May our good God help us not to fail in submission. Pray that I at least fail not that when moments of bitter and painful trial come I may do my duty and the ‘dirty work’ for God’s sake who has been so good to me. I have not said to anyone else what I have said to you about her unfitness. My duty is clearly to uphold her and with God’s help I will.”

Here she is at 56 still dealing with what happens in life, still finding the resources within her to understand. She stays true to herself but surrenders the meaning to God. Her attitude was not a subservient one but rather **a deep listening to see where God was leading her and the Institute at any given moment**. MMK keeps hoping and keeps listening to her inner core. This woman models for us that in our ordinary and extraordinary struggles of life we ***“do all that we can with the means at our disposal and leave the rest calmly to God” 1888***

I was asked to talk about **the Real Mary MacKillop and not so much the saintly bits**. My efforts have significant limitations I know. However, Ladies and Gentlemen on the 17th of October thousands if not millions of people especially Australians, New Zealanders, East Timorese, Peruvians, Asians, Indians, Africans, Pacific Islanders, Scottish, Irish and many parts of Europe will rise up and call out **St. Mary MacKillop pray for us. I think that at that point I will know that she is real and that she IS a saint.**

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