

Mary MacKillop's Story

Mary MacKillop's parents, Alexander and Flora (nee MacDonald), were both Scottish Catholics. Alexander, who was born on January 21, 1812 at Lochaber in the Scottish Highlands, migrated to Australia. He arrived in Sydney on the '*Brilliant*' on January 20, 1838 and in the following year moved to Melbourne to work with the trading firm, Campbell and Sons. There he met his future wife Flora MacDonald who had been born at Glen Roy on June 11, 1816, and arrived in Australia from Scotland on the '*Glen Huntley*' on April 17, 1840.

The couple was married at St. Francis' Church, Melbourne on July 14, 1840. Mary, the eldest of their eight children, was born at Fitzroy, a suburb of Melbourne, on January 15, 1842. She was baptised 'Maria Ellen' on February 28, 1842, but was always called 'Mary'.

Not a great deal is known about her early life and education, but as an adult she wrote that her home had not been a happy one. This was probably due, in part, to the fact that her father was not a successful businessman. He experienced great difficulty in supporting his family, emotionally and financially. When Mary was a baby, he became bankrupt. Consequently the family home in Fitzroy was sold and they lived in a succession of residences around Melbourne.



As Mary became older, she gradually assumed more and more responsibility for the running of the household and the financial support of the family. At the age of sixteen Mary sought outside employment. Initially she worked as a nursery governess and then as an assistant and forewoman in Melbourne for the stationery firm, Sands and Kenny, now known as Sands and McDougall.

Eventually the MacKillop family moved to the country. In 1860, when she was eighteen, Mary went to Penola in South Australia, where she took up the position of the governess of the children of Alexander Cameron. It was here that

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she first met Fr Julian Tenison Woods, whose Parish of Penola extended for 22,000 square miles/56,000 square kilometres.

In the previous year, the Bishop of Adelaide had challenged all the priests of his diocese to set up Catholic schools for the children of their areas. He did this because the government supported only secular schools and he was afraid that if the Catholic children went to these schools, they would lose the faith. Father Woods wanted to do what the Bishop was asking, but could not find any teachers willing to come to the South East. When Mary heard him speak of his concern for the Catholic education of the children of his parish, she began considering the possibility of dedicating her life to this work.

However, Mary left Penola in 1862 to be governess to the children of the Duncan Camerons in Portland, Western Victoria. She took out a lease on an old guesthouse known as 'Bay View House', where she gathered her family together. They took in boarders to supplement the family's income. During this time, she maintained her contact with Fr Woods and together they dreamed and planned how they might set up a new Religious Congregation dedicated to the work of educating the children of the area.

Along with her younger sisters Lexie and Annie, Mary returned to Penola in 1866. They opened what was to become the first Josephite School. This was in an old stable that had been converted into a school by their brother John. By March of that year about fifty-five children were enrolled. No children were excluded because their parents could not pay. It was in Penola that Mary and her followers began wearing a black dress as an outward sign of their simple lifestyle. Mary's first two companions were Blanche Amsinck and Julia Fitzgerald. Blanche, born in the same year as Mary, became known as Sister Francis Xavier and Julia, who was five years older, became Sister Francis of the Five Wounds.

After a time, Blanche opened a school in Mount Gambier. In the meantime, the Bishop had moved Father Woods to Adelaide and appointed him Director General of Catholic Education and Inspector of Schools. In June 1867, he invited Mary and another of her companions, Rose Cunningham, who became Sister Rose Cunningham, to Adelaide. Here, the small community grew in number. Not only did they open



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more schools but they also tended the poor, the old, the sick, the homeless, the marginalised of society and anyone else in need of material assistance. They took no payment for their work and existed on what they could obtain by begging in the streets and by 'payments' of food or goods from those they helped.


On July 2, 1867, Mary and Rose opened the first Josephite school situated in the Cathedral Hall, which is no longer standing. They exchanged their black dresses for religious habits - the special kind of clothes that Sisters used to wear. Then, on August 15, 1867, Mary became the first Sister of St Joseph to take the religious vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience.

Right from the beginning, the government did not support the schools run by Mary and the Sisters of St Joseph. Some of the clergy wanted government assistance, even though that meant that the teachers would not be permitted to teach Religious Instruction during school time. Mary and Father Woods refused to be involved in any such scheme.

The Sisters also concentrated on educating the really poor children and went out of their convents to visit and assist needy people in their homes, in hospital and in gaol. Anyone who joined the Congregation, even a woman for a poor family, was given full membership rights.

The Sisters lived in small houses like the ordinary people in the towns where they had schools. In the city, they had a central convent, called a Mother House, where they could all gather together at times. Their leader, or superior, lived in this house and made all the important decisions about the Sisters' appointments and other matters affecting their lives. This kind of arrangement in a Religious Order is described as Central Government.

Some of the clergy were unhappy with the Sisters' living and working arrangements. They were afraid that Mary and the Sisters were not real Sisters and that they might not be useful to the Church. So they complained to the Bishop and asked him to change the Sisters' rule. They thought that the central superior should be abolished and that each parish priest should be the superior of any convents in his parish. They also wanted only rich women to become full members of the



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Congregation and the uneducated ones to be Lay Sisters or servants. The Bishop yielded to pressure and agreed to change the Sisters' rule. Mary challenged his authority quietly, firmly and with great dignity. She was ordered to leave Adelaide for a country convent. In an attempt to find a solution to the conflict, she made a formal request to see the Bishop before leaving. However, he interpreted this as a refusal to go. For this 'disobedience' the Bishop excommunicated her and threatened to do the same to others who supported her. He also closed their convent at Franklin Street, so the Sisters from that community were left homeless. Some of them went back to their families. The bishops sent others away.

They all did what they could to support Mary. It was a troubled time for her. She had to discontinue her work with the poor and the underprivileged. She even had to find somewhere to live. She received much support from people outside the Church, especially Mr Emmanuel Solomon, a member of the Adelaide Jewish community. A Jesuit priest, Fr Joseph Tappeiner, also provided her with much needed spiritual and moral support because he believed that her excommunication was invalid.

Ultimately, Bishop Sheil rescinded Mary's excommunication on his death bed and the sentence was lifted at St Mary's Church, Morphette Vale, South Australia on February 22, 1872. In March of that same year, Mary and her Sisters renewed their vows and donned their habits again. An investigation appointed by the Holy See found them innocent of the charges brought against them. Schools were re-opened and the Sisters were free to carry on their work once more.



In 1873 more questions about the legitimacy of the Sisters' Rule led Mary to undertake the long sea voyage to Rome. On April 21, 1874, she received the Constitution of the Institute from the Holy See. Central Government was retained as an integral part of the Rule. The new Constitution was worded differently from the old, but still contained the same spirit and way of life. While in Rome, Mary was befriended by an Irish priest, Monsignor Kirby. Church decision-making moved slowly so Mary visited England and Ireland while she was waiting for the new

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Constitution. She found many young women willing to come to Australia and help in the work she had begun.

After nearly two years Mary returned to Adelaide. While away she had corresponded with her Sisters regularly, advising them on how to live good and simple lives. They accepted the new Constitution wholeheartedly. Sisters working in Bathurst (New South Wales), however, were told by their Bishop that they must separate from the Adelaide Mother House and obey his rules instead. Mary rejected this but would not influence the Sisters in their decision. Those who chose to support Central Government withdrew from Bathurst in 1876.

A similar situation developed in Queensland, and Mary withdrew the Sisters from there in 1880. The Sisters from Queensland went to the Sydney and Armidale dioceses in NSW to continue their work with the poor in schools and charitable institutions. Most of the Bathurst Sisters went to Adelaide. Two, however, decided to stay behind. One was Sister Hyacinth Quinlan who became leader of the Federation (sometimes called 'Black') Josephites, a Congregation founded by Bishop Matthew Quinn to teach the country children in his diocese. These Sisters' rule was very similar to that of Mary's Sisters. The principal difference was that the Bishop was their superior.

In 1883 Mary was again in trouble. The issue of Central Government was questioned anew as some Bishops still wanted control over the Sisters' Rule. One of these was Bishop Reynolds of Adelaide, who ordered Mary to go to Sydney so that he could control the Adelaide Sisters. He was most upset when they refused to break off their allegiance to her and Central Government. Next, Mary was replaced as the Sister's leader when Cardinal Moran informed her that her election of Mother General in 1881 was invalid. In her place, he appointed Sister Bernard Walsh.

The Bishops failed in their efforts, however, for in 1888 Rome approved the Sisters of Saint Joseph as a Religious Congregation and ratified their Central Government once and for all. Their Mother House was to be located in Sydney, Australia. Then, on the sudden death of Mother Bernard in 1898, Mary MacKillop was elected Superior General once more.




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Over the years, Mary received requests from bishops and priests for her Sisters to work in many parts of Australia: Queensland, Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria and also as far away as New Zealand. Mary spent much of her time travelling to where her Sisters were working in Australia and New Zealand. At the same time she continued to minister to and serve the poor and the disadvantaged. While visiting New Zealand in 1902, she suffered a severe stroke on May 11. By December, she was well enough to sail back to Australia arriving in Sydney just before Christmas.

From that time onwards, she was confined to a wheelchair and her movements were restricted. Nevertheless, she continued to correspond with all her Sisters. Her writings and the advice and observations contained in them are still used by the Sisters today. On August 8, 1909, Mary MacKillop died. She is buried in the Memorial Chapel at the Mother House of her Congregation in North Sydney.

Today, Mary MacKillop is honoured as Australia's first saint. Her life was lived with great faith in God, whom she never doubted. She displayed courage and strength to stand up for what she believed was right and fair and never wavered from her devotion to the poor and the needy. Her simple life was lived in a way that provides inspiration for ordinary people in our world today.

A handwritten signature of Mary MacKillop in a cursive script, rendered in a light grey color.

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