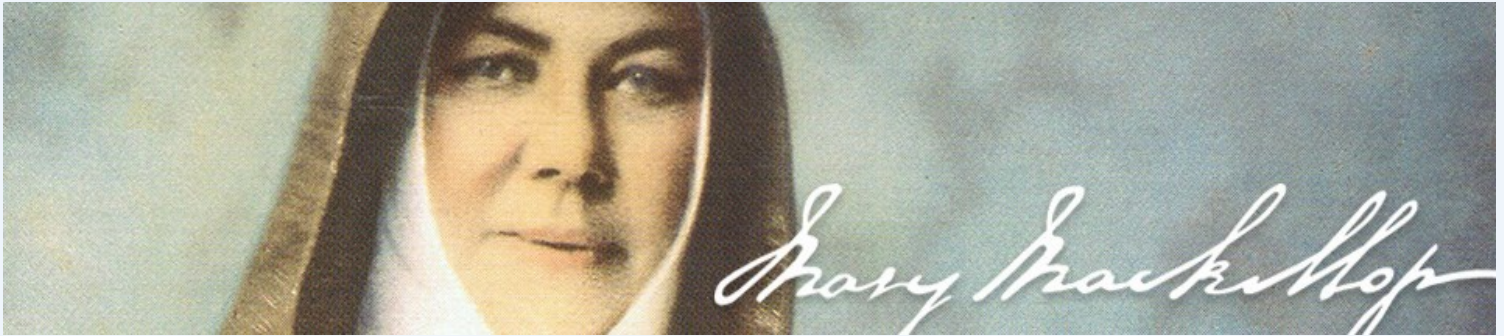# Celebrating the Feast day of Australia's First Saint

Saint Mary of the Cross MacKillop

8 August 2020

St Mary MacKillop, also called **Saint Mary of the Cross**, was canonized on October 17, 2010. St. Mary of the Cross MacKillop, was a religious figure, an educator, and a social reformer. She was the first Australian beatified by the Roman Catholic Church and the first Australian to be recognized as one of its saints.

About St Mary of the Cross MacKillop

Mary Helen MacKillop was born in Melbourne on January 15, 1842. Her parents, Flora and Alexander MacKillop, were Catholic immigrants from Scotland. Mary, the eldest of eight children, was raised in the working-class Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy.

At 16, Mary went out to work, to support her younger brothers and sisters. Two years later she took a job as a governess on her uncle's farm in the small country town of Penola in South Australia. There Mary provided her cousins with a basic education and soon extended this to the poor children of the town. It was also here that Mary met the man who would change her life forever, Father Julian Tenison Woods.

Father Woods shared Mary's dream of educating the poor. He became her mentor and spiritual guide, encouraging Mary to continue this work, assuring her that educating the poor would be an ideal way to serve God.

Together, Mary and Father Woods opened the first free Catholic school in Penola in 1866.

In the following year, the pair formed a new religious order of nuns - the Sisters of St Joseph - devoted to teaching the poor. At just 25 years old, Mary took her vows, becoming the order's first sister and its leader.

The Sisters of St Joseph was the first Catholic order founded by an Australian. They vowed to live in poverty, own no property and were committed to equality. These were central to the order's rule, trusting only in Divine Providence.

Over the coming years, the sisters opened schools in other Australlian cities, founded hospitals and orphanages, as well as provided shelter for the homeless, especially for unmarried mothers, former prostitutes and for women released from prison. The Josephite sisters were entirely self funded raising much of their money by begging.

At that time, other religious orders were controlled by their local bishops but the Sisters of St Joseph insisted on governing themselves. This degree of autonomy caused considerable friction with the powers that be in the church.

This conflict, along with other allegations led Adelaide Bishop Laurence Sheil to excommunicate Mary MacKillop for alleged insubordination in 1871.

However, five months later on his deathbed, Bishop Sheil acknowledged that he might have been misled, and he instructed that Mary be absolved and restored to her order.

In 1873, Mary travelled to Rome to meet with Pope Piux IX where she won papal approval for the Josephite rule, with modifications that relaxed the degree of poverty imposed upon the sisters. MacKillop expanded the order's educational and charitable endeavours and attracted new sisters.

In 1875 she was appointed superior general of the order. Despite her elevation, she continued to meet with hostility from a number of priests and bishops, and the sisters' work was circumscribed in certain cities.

In 1885 she was removed as superior general, though she was reinstated in 1899 and remained at the head of the order until her death.

Mary suffered a stroke in 1902 and was an invalid until her death on August 8, 1909.

Mary was buried in Sydney's historic Gore Hill Cemetery. Today, a memorial marks the spot where she once lay. Five years after her death, her body was transferred to the newly built Mary MacKillop Chapel in the grounds of the North Sydney convent where she last lived.

Mary MacKillop Prayer
Ever generous God,
You inspired Saint Mary MacKillop
To live her life faithful to the Gospel
of Jesus Christ
and constant in bringing hope and
encouragement
to those who were disheartened,
lonely or needy.
With confidence in your generous provi-
dence and through the intercession of
Saint Mary MacKillop
We ask that you grant our request………………
We ask that our faith and hope be fired afresh by the Holy Spirit
so that we too, like Mary MacKillop, may live with courage, trust and openness.
Ever generous God hear our prayer.
We ask this through Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Mary MacKillop