

Saint Mary of the Cross



August 8 is the solemnity of St Mary of the Cross (Mary MacKillop). Mary MacKillop is Australia's first saint. She led a remarkable life in service of others.

Early Life

Mary was born in Melbourne, in January 1842. She was known to be a very serious child who had a strong dedication to God and a desire to help people in need.

Mary was the eldest of eight children. Mary's parents were both well educated, so even though Mary and her siblings had little formal education, they were all well educated.

Mary's father had a strong dedication to God. In his youth, he had desired to be a priest, but eventually abandoned the idea before migrating to Sydney in 1838. Mary's father gave his children a strong grounding in faith, but failed to hold down a regular job and so life was hard for her family. They were often supported by their relatives and in time, Mary and her brother assumed much of the responsibility for supporting their family.

When Mary was 16, she began work as a clerk and supported her mother and younger siblings. At the age of 18, Mary moved to a small town called Penola, in South Australia, to become the governess to her Aunt's children. While she was there, she educated not only the children in her care, but also others who lived in poverty – particularly aboriginal children. Here she met Father Julian woods, who was a priest at the Penola mission.

Early Work



Father Julian Woods had a plan to found a religious order whose members would become teachers and enable him to establish some schools in South Australia. He became Mary's spiritual mentor and even after she returned to her family in Victoria, she kept in touch with Father Woods and together they planned for the establishment of his order.

Eventually, in 1866, Mary returned to Penola and took charge of the school Father Woods had set up. At this time, Mary became the first sister of St Joseph.

In 1866, Father Woods was appointed as secretary and Director of Catholic Education in South Australia. He moved to Adelaide and invited Mary to join him to help to train his teachers. Here he

established the Rule for the Sister of Saint Joseph. Mary's dream of devoting her life to God was now a reality.

Mary and her sister returned to Penola in 1866 and ran the Catholic school. The school was open to any child who wished to learn, regardless of whether they could pay for their education. Mary declared her intention to serve God as a religious sister and became Sister Mary of the Cross.

By 1869, there were 82 sisters managing 23 schools, an orphanage, a refuge for women in need of protection and a House of Providence for the homeless – all in South Australia. Then Bishop James Quinn invited the sister of St Joseph to make a foundation in Queensland. Mary and four companions left to set up the community.

Challenges

In 1871, Mary returned to Adelaide. Father Woods had informed her that all was not well among the Adelaide sisters. When she arrived, Father Woods sent her to make a new foundation in Port Augusta. Father Woods seemed on the verge of a breakdown. The bishop eventually sent Father Woods away from the diocese and tried to force Mary and the sisters to make significant changes to their Rule of Life. While the congregation appeared to be flourishing, it was also plagued by trouble. Mary made it her mission to support the sisters and oversee the ministries.

In September 1871, Bishop Sheil excommunicated Mary from the Church and evicted the sisters from the convent. Mary went into hiding with Father Woods' brother. After Mary's excommunication Bishop Sheil's health failed and several days before he died in 1872, he arranged to lift the excommunication. Before long, most of the sisters renewed their vows and returned to their works. News of Adelaide's troubles reached the Pope so he sent an Apostolic commission to inquire into the events there. They found that Mary and her sisters were innocent of any wrongdoing, but that Father Woods was not a fit director.

Dreams Fulfilled

After this, Mary travelled to Rome to seek formal approval for the Rule. She eventually accepted a new constitution. The sisters accepted the new constitution and chose Mary as their first Mother General. However, there was still much opposition to Mary's order and she was removed from her position as superior general. She was gracious in accepting this decision. After seventeen years, Mary was re-elected into this position. Mary suffered a stroke but continued to take an active role in the congregation. In 1907 she established a training school, which eventually became part of the Australian Catholic University. Mary's health continued to decline until her death in 1909.

