Mary MacKillop

An Australian Saint

Mary MacKillop was born in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, on 15 January 1842. She was the eldest of eight children. Her family struggled financially and, from the age of 14, Mary needed to work to help support the family. In 1860, she went to Penola in South Australia to be governess to her uncle’s children. She spoke with the local priest, Fr Julian Tennison Woods, about her desire to become a nun and together they dreamed of starting a religious group. Six years later, on 19 March 1866 (St Joseph’s Day) Mary wore a plain black dress to signify that she had begun to live a Religious life. Within two years 120 women had joined the Religious Institute. They took on the work of educating children in small parish schools, and caring for orphans and needy women.

Little did Fr Woods and Mary know what was to spring from so small a beginning. These ‘Josephite’ Sisters walked the streets to visit the poor, and lived in twos and threes in rented houses in isolated areas or city slums. The Sisters lived and shared their possessions as equals.

Mary overcame many obstacles to follow her dream, but she never lost hope. Mary’s motto was ‘never see a need without trying to do something about it.’ Her life reveals to us a compassionate God, a God of love. Her actions acknowledged the human dignity of each person. Her life speaks to Australians, in a unique way, of the message of God’s love for all, especially for the ‘underdog’ and the ‘battler.’ She embodies all that is best in our Australian nation and its people.

The Church does not make saints – it recognises saints

Saints are the heroes of the Church. Mary MacKillop may not have considered herself a saint but those around her saw her heroic qualities and began to see her as a saintly person. After Mary died in 1909, the memory of her goodness was kept alive by those who knew her. The Sisters of St Joseph collected many stories and memories about Mary. Her writings and letters were collected.

Now, after examining her life, the Church has verified that Mary is worthy to be recognised as a saint because the holiness and goodness of her life has been proved.

Along the path to canonisation, the Church required evidence of two miracles as a sign that Mary now intercedes with God. The proof of these miracles was rigorously studied and presented to the Vatican. When the miracles were accepted, the Pope issued a decree for canonisation – for the title of ‘Saint’ to be granted. On 17 October 2010, Mary MacKillop will become Australia’s first canonised saint. Her canonisation means that she will be recognised world-wide as a saint for the whole Church. She will be known as Saint Mary of the Cross (her religious name) and her feastday, 8 August, will be listed in the universal Church calendar.

Saint Mary of the Cross — Pray for us
On 17 October 2010, Mary MacKillop will not be the only new saint recognised by the Church. Five other people, who lived holy lives, will be acknowledged as saints. The following will help us to know a little about each of them.

**Stanislas Soltys (1433 – 1489)**

Louis Soltys was born in Kazimierz, Poland. He studied theology and philosophy before entering the Canons Regular of the Lateran in 1456, taking the name Stanislas. He devoted his life to the Eucharist and to the care of the sick and the poor.

After he was ordained as a priest, he became very popular as a great preacher and confessor. He also became the Prior and novice master at his monastery. As with many holy people, those who knew him considered him a living saint, while Stanislas saw his own life as a constant struggle for holiness. He died 3 May 1489 and is buried in the church of Corpus Domini, Kazimierz, Poland. Popular devotion to Father Stanislas developed soon after his death.

**Battista da Varano (1458 – 1524)**

Camilla da Varano’s father was the prince of Camerino in Italy. She spent her childhood in the surroundings of a large palace enjoying social life, studying Latin, law, painting, and riding horses. As a young woman she felt she had a vocation to the religious life, but it was hard for her to accept and her father opposed it. When she finally decided to join the convent, she saw clearly that God was calling her. At the age of 23, Camilla entered the convent of St Clare in Urbino. At her profession she took the name Sister Battista.

Some years later, in 1502, her father and her brothers were killed in a persecution and Sr Battista was obliged to take refuge in southern Italy. Three years later, Pope Julius II sent her to establish a convent in Fermo, central Italy, and she travelled to other convents to educate nuns about the rule of St Clare. Battista’s writings reveal her ardent love for Christ. She died on 31 May 1524 during a plague.

**Cándida María de Jesús (1845 – 1912)**

Cándida María de Jesús was born Juana Josefa Cipitria y Barriola, in the Basque region of Spain. Her father was a weaver, and the family was poor. She was always sensitive to the abandoned and needy and felt at an early age that she was ‘for God alone.’

In 1863, when she was 23, she met Jesuit Father Miguel José Herranz, who encouraged her in her vision to form a Religious Congregation. Thus it was that, in 1871, the Congregation of the Daughters of Jesus was founded for the Christian education of children and youth. In a short time the Sisters grew in number throughout Spain, opening schools in various cities, and eventually spread throughout the world.

Cándida constantly encouraged the sisters through her writings: ‘How grateful we must be for the very great benefit the Lord did us by calling us to this our beloved congregation so that we should ... save many souls for heaven!’ she said in one of her letters. Mother Candida died on 9 August 1912.
**Brother Andre Bessette (1845 – 1937)**

Alfred Bessette was born in 1845 near Montreal, Canada to a poor, working-class family. He experienced great tragedy in his life—his father died after a timber felling accident when he was only 9-years old, and his mother died from tuberculosis when he was 12. He was sent to live with his uncle and aunt. The deaths of his parents and his own struggles with illness, only made his faith in God and compassion for others much stronger.

Alfred entered the Congregation of Holy Cross in 1870 and was given the name Brother André. His first assignment, which was to last him 40 years, was as the doorman (as well as the barber) at the community’s school in Montreal, Notre Dame College.

Brother André developed a deep devotion to Saint Joseph. As people came to the school, burdened by their own struggles and suffering, Brother André directed them to pray to St Joseph. Through Brother André’s faith and healing power, thousands of people were cured and he became known as the ‘Miracle Man of Montreal.’ Brother André counselled his visitors to pray to St Joseph, and he never took credit for the miraculous cures his visitors ascribed to him.

His dream was to build a shrine to St Joseph—a project that began with a tiny chapel in 1904. By the time of Brother André’s death in 1937, the shrine was a Montreal landmark. Brother André died in 1937 at the age of 92. As a man of true humility, Brother Andre acknowledged the gifts God had given him.

His humility was that of a person who didn’t have to prove his standing before others. He didn’t need any fancy titles; he understood those words of Jesus which said that the greatest among you is the one who serves others.

**Giulia Salzano (1846 – 1929)**

Giulia Salzano was born in the province of Caserta, Italy, on 13 October 1846. Her father died when she was four, and she was sent to live in an orphanage run by the Sisters of Charity. She remained there until she was fifteen. She earned a teaching diploma and then taught in the local school at Casoria, in the Province of Naples, having moved there with her family in October 1865.

Alongside her teaching, she had a great interest in the catechism, imparting the faith to children, young people and adults. In her constant concern to make known the teachings and life of Jesus through education and witness, she founded the Congregation of the Catechetical Sisters of the Sacred Heart in 1905.

She devoted her life to teaching. She said, ‘While I have any life left in me, I will continue to teach the catechism. And then, I assure you, I would be very happy to die teaching the catechism.’

In the same way she encouraged the sisters: ‘The Sister catechist must be ready, at every moment, to instruct the little ones and the uneducated. She must not count the sacrifices such a ministry demands.’ She died on 17 May 1929.
The Steps Toward Canonisation

Stage 1 – Servant of God
The process towards canonisation begins at the local diocese. In response to a request from members of the local Church, the bishop gives permission for the holy life of an individual to be investigated. This may begin five years after the death of the person. Normally a group is formed to promote the cause of the proposed saint. When all the information is gathered it is presented to the Pope’s representatives at the Vatican. They appoint someone to investigate further. At this point the holy person is referred to as a Servant of God.

Stage 2 – Venerable
The next step is to recommend to the pope that he make a proclamation of the Servant of God’s heroic life. From this point the one said to be ‘heroic in virtue’ is referred to by the title Venerable. A Venerable has as yet no feast day, no churches may be built in his or her honour, but prayer cards and other materials may be printed to encourage the faithful to pray for a miracle by his or her intercession. This is taken as as a sign of God’s will that the person be canonised.

Stage 3 – Blessed
The holy person is then beatified by the Church when it is proven that a miracle has taken place by his or her intercession. Today, these miracles are almost always miraculous cures, as these are the easiest to establish based on the Catholic Church’s requirements for a miracle. (The patient was sick, there was no known cure for the ailment, prayers were directed to the Venerable, the patient was cured, the cure was spontaneous, instantaneous, complete and lasting, and doctors cannot find any natural explanation.) After this the holy person is known as Blessed.

Stage 4 – Saint
To be canonised a saint, at least one other miracle is necessary. Canonisation is a statement by the Church that the person is with God. The saint is assigned a feast day which may be celebrated anywhere within the Catholic Church. Parish churches may be built in his or her honour, and the faithful may freely and without restriction celebrate and honour the saint.

Activities for the Classroom

* Create and decorate posters of the sayings of St Mary of the Cross.
* St Stanislaus Soltys and St Battista da Verano were born during the 15th Century (1400-1499). Find out three or four important events that happened during that century.
* Make a painting or collage of St Battista as a girl riding about the palace grounds. Why do you think she decided to leave a comfortable life at the palace and enter a convent?
* Devise and dramatise a conversation between Australia’s St Mary of the Cross and Italy’s St Guilia about their families, their faith and their work.
* St Candida lived in Spain, a country which has produced many saints. Can you name some of them and find our some details about them.
* St Andre Bessette wanted to build a shrine to St Joseph. Could you design one or even make a small shrine for yourself. (See an idea for this on the Domestic Church site.)
* If these saints were alive now, what particular needs do you think they would see in our world today? What do you think they would do to make a difference in today’s world?
* On a map of the world locate the towns in or near which each of these new saints were born. Four of the new saints lived in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Make a graph to see how their lifetimes overlapped.